

5-2009

Communicative violence in romantic relationships

Christina L. Moore

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/honors-theses>

Recommended Citation

Moore, Christina L., "Communicative violence in romantic relationships" (2009). *Honors Theses*. Paper 676.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

Communicative Violence in Romantic Relationships

by

Christina L. Moore

Honors Thesis

in

*Rhetoric and Communication Studies Department
University of Richmond
Richmond, VA*

May 4, 2009

Advisor: Dr. Archana Pathak Bhatt

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	6
CHAPTER 1.....	7
Introduction.....	7
Framing the Question.....	9
Verbal Abuse.....	10
Verbal Abuse Definition.....	12
Power of Language.....	13
Speech Acts' Effects.....	15
Campus Speech Codes.....	16
Fighting Words Doctrine.....	18
Violence.....	19
Violence Definition.....	19
Verbal Abuse Violence.....	20
Legal Statutes.....	20
Judicial Branch.....	22
Conclusion.....	24
CHAPTER 2.....	25
Review of Literature.....	25
Verbal Abuse Definition.....	25
Key Limitations in Current Research.....	26
Verbal Abuse Characteristics.....	28
Abuse and Victim Profiles.....	30

Choice to Remain in Relationship.....	31
Connections with Physical Abuse.....	32
Those at Risk.....	32
Role of Gender.....	33
Particular Audience.....	34
Sexuality.....	35
Age.....	35
Ethnicity and Class.....	36
Review of Methodological Approaches.....	36
Conclusion.....	36
CHAPTER 3.....	38
Methods.....	38
Participants.....	40
Procedure.....	41
Focus Groups.....	43
Interviews.....	44
Focus Group and Interview Analysis.....	45
Confidentiality.....	46
Conclusion.....	46
CHAPTER 4.....	47
Examination of Themes.....	47
Hypothetical.....	47
Description of the Participants.....	49

Protecting One's Identity.....	49
Third Person.....	50
Minimize One's Experience.....	51
Identifying the Victim.....	53
Separating Oneself from the Victim.....	53
Age.....	54
Personality Characteristics.....	55
Contrast with the Abuser.....	58
Rationalizing the Behavior.....	58
Love.....	61
Tipping Point.....	63
Warning Signs.....	65
Progression to Physical Violence.....	67
Outside Perspective.....	68
Victim Misunderstood.....	69
Missing Details.....	71
Friend's Role.....	73
Key Informant Interviews.....	76
Breaking the Pattern.....	77
Limitations to Responses.....	78
Advice.....	79
The Disconnect Between Key Informants and Students.....	81
Conclusion.....	82

CHAPTER 5.....	83
Discussion.....	83
Participatory Action Research.....	92
Limitations in Study.....	92
Future Directions.....	93
Conclusion.....	94
References.....	95
Appendix A: Email.....	101
Appendix B: Informed Consent.....	102
Appendix C: Hypothetical.....	106
Appendix D: Contact Information.....	108
Appendix E: IRB Approval.....	109
Appendix F: Focus Group and One-on-One Interviews Themes.....	110
Appendix G: Key Informant Themes.....	111

ABSTRACT

Verbal abuse occurs in college relationships, but this form of abuse lacks a clear definition and definitive characteristics. I studied the dialogue that surrounds verbal abuse. I was interested in how verbal abuse was discussed instead of the specific details of the experiences. Verbal abuse was purposely studied separately from physical abuse. Prior research and legal statutes were reviewed before conducting this study. Through the use of focus groups, one-on-one interviews and key informant interviews a broader perspective of verbal abuse was gained. The six salient themes to emerge were (1) how to protect one's identity, (2) characteristics of the victim, (3) rationalizing the behavior, (4) the tipping point, (5) outside perspective and (6) breaking the pattern.

Key Words: verbal abuse, communication as violence, narratives, focus groups, participant interviews, college relationships

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me”

Growing up we all learned this little ditty meant to make us strong in the face of teasing; however, this saying falsely teaches us that words are harmless and minimizes the power of language. Physical abuse is seen as wrong, but verbal abuse is up to judgment for when we agree that abuse has occurred and when it has not. Verbal abuse conditions are viewed as arbitrary. Verbal abuse tends to be accepted and rationalized as justifiable behavior without taking into account its harmful nature. I was ignorant of how verbal abuse worked until my second year of college after my relationship with my high school boyfriend ended.

Throughout my first year of college, I endured an unhealthy relationship that had originated in high school. During my senior year of high school, I thought I had met my prince charming. The beginning of the relationship was filled with future promises and material gifts. I noticed he had a temper, but he always apologized soon after. Yelling was not that big of a deal to me. A few weeks into college, our relationship began to change. I was meeting new people and he got extremely jealous about any of the guys I hung out with. The first time he called me a slut and whore, I remember being taken aback. I believed him that I had done something wrong and that I was ruining the relationship. These outbursts became frequent.

I grew to accept his temper and the daily phone calls that consisted of hours being yelled at. I truly believed that we were happy and I was lucky to have found a caring guy. He loved me and it was my fault. The best way to avoid the arguments was to follow a set pattern. I became even quieter. I stopped hanging out with other guys and my weekends became devoted to him. I did not tell anyone what was going on in the relationship. No one would understand that he did

not mean to call me these things. While my friends at school tried to determine why I was unhappy, my friends from home continued to reinforce what a nice guy he was.

I can still remember the exhaustion I always felt and uneasy feeling in my stomach when I knew an argument was about to start. His voice would keep getting louder and then the names would start to come out. I lost most of my self esteem by believing the insults and blaming myself for everything. The arguments attacked my character rather than an actual problem. After awhile, I just became numb and settled into this routine. I could yell back, but the argument would just last longer.

Reflecting back on my first year, while I was in the middle of this relationship I was also surrounded by empowering messages regarding women. Classes were offered specifically geared towards women. Student organizations were being led by strong vibrant women. Westhampton College was dedicated to the women of the university. All these resources surrounded me and I still could not connect these two opposing messages and apply them to my own experience.

It took months for me to explain what had been wrong in the relationship. Most of my friends associated the arguments to my boyfriend's jealous nature and short temper. It was not until months after the break up that the term verbal abuse even arose. I did not seriously consider this suggestion because of how I had stereotyped verbal abuse. Finally one day, I did a simple internet search to learn more about verbal abuse. This research expanded my view of verbal abuse causing me to see how it did occur right around me, even to me.

The first friend I opened up to told me that I was making it up and had exaggerated the fights. I silenced myself. I second guessed myself for months before opening up and even now

it takes a lot of strength to expand on the whole story. Even today rather than explain my past with my ex-boyfriend, I will just refer to him as being really weird.

My experience, this silence that I felt and the lack of awareness sparked my passion to study verbal abuse in college relationships for my thesis. My interest in the social narrative led me to conduct focus groups and interviews with women from my undergraduate university. I was interested to study this narrative in how we understand, make sense, define and justify the phenomena of verbal abuse. I was curious to see if there was a threshold and at what it would be reached. I wanted this research to explore how the participants would discuss verbal abuse and the dialogue that would emerge. I decided to give a hypothetical situation and observe the dialogue that occurred among groups of women.

Ideally I would like to promote verbal abuse awareness among Westhampton women. My goal is to include a participatory action research element which will allow me to do just that. I wanted to use my participants' voices to illuminate the narratives that surround this topic. This knowledge could help prevent staying in an unhealthy relationship or at least promote understanding in past relationships. Even though I have been researching verbal abuse for my thesis, I still consider it a loaded term and at times doubt my experience. I believe there is a lack of research regarding verbal abuse in college relationships making this thesis imperative to be conducted.

Framing the Question

My experience is not unusual in how verbal abuse is apparent in the college relationships, but it is still not clearly understood in general. Classifying, interpreting and handling verbal abuse relies on uncertain conditions. Verbal abuse does not merely precede other forms of

abuse, but it is a form of abuse in and of itself. Verbal abuse needs to be studied separately from physical abuse. This chapter serves to frame the questions that drive this research project.

Verbal abuse must be clearly defined and separate from physical abuse to begin understanding its importance and effects. The power of language and its effects classify verbal abuse as violence. This paper defines verbal abuse as the improper use of words determined by intent, control and power.¹ Violence is the treatment or usage of physical or nonphysical characteristics causing interference with personal freedom. Often we looked to the law to combat violence; however, the law does not properly handle verbal violence.

I believe that the law is not prepared to effectively handle verbal abuse because of the problems in the law itself and the system; the nature of verbally abuse relationships is misunderstood by society and needs further study. To this end, I examine the history of law cases and acts to see what meanings have been attributed to verbal abuse. These meanings will provide further perspective about the dialogue surrounding verbal abuse.

Verbal Abuse

Verbal abuse has not been clearly defined nor consistently classified in the same manner throughout legal and communication literature. The verbal abuse definition struggles to delineate when words cross the line progressing from playfulness to abusiveness. Verbal abuse has been categorized as destructive verbal communication, intimate violence, nonphysical abuse, maltreatment, psychological aggression, verbal aggression, emotional abuse, controlling behaviors, competitive behaviors and psychological torture (Duck & Wood, 1995, p.140, Infante & Rancer, 1996, p. 321, Marshall, 1996, 380). This unclear definition of verbal abuse and the category itself illustrate the need for research.

¹ Verbal abuse does not have a standard definition. This definition was created from my research.

Verbal abuse has been classified as a type of domestic violence. Domestic violence is “a pattern of behavior in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner;” This abuse can take place in the forms of “physical, sexual, emotional, economic or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person” (National Domestic Violence Hotline). However, verbal abuse is one of the least studied types of domestic violence. It has been studied as a condition that leads to physical abuse, but it is rarely studied on its own (Infante, Riddle, Horvath & Tumlin, 1992, p.118, Stets & Henderson, 1991, p.29).

When verbal abuse has been studied, it is studied in connection to physical abuse, but it needs to be studied separately. Butler draws parallels between language and physical harm in how language could come before what a body might do (Butler, 1997, p.4, 10). Verbal abuse needs to be studied on its own because of its severe nature. In a survey, 72% of battered women stated that emotional abuse had a harsher impact on them compared to the physical abuse (Klein & Orloff, 1993, p.872). Verbal abuse has also been defined as emotional abuse (Marshall, 1996, p.380).

Physical abuse and verbal abuse are connected. 98% women who are physically abused have also been emotionally abused. The emotional abuse, threats and harassment intensifies developing into greater violence such as physical abuse (Klein & Orloff, 1993, p.859, 872). The verbal abuse effects last beyond the initial interaction. The learned trait of verbal abuse can continue into other relationships and be taught to future generations (Epstein, 1999).

Domestic violence is taken more seriously now compared to 30 years ago, but it is only beginning to make progress. Society is still unaware as to what verbal abuse consists of and how it should be defined. It remains unrecognized by society (Epstein, 1999). Furthermore verbal abuse should not just be recognized as an abuse, but it also should be classified as its own

violence. Language's power is exemplified in verbal abuse causing long lasting effects.

Combating verbal abuse will remain a struggle as demonstrated in the difficulties faced by both the campus speech act codes and the fighting words doctrine.

Verbal abuse definition.

Because verbal abuse lacks a universal definition, I established a definition based on research and standard dictionary definitions for the purpose of this study. This research defines verbal abuse as the improper use of words determined by intent, control and power. This term can be further studied as the two separate terms of verbal and abuse. Verbal are words expressed in speech and abuse is the improper use of words (Oxford English Dictionary). This definition is applied throughout the thesis and study, but a definition needs to be created and accepted to become a unit of analysis. Not having a universal definition prevents language from fully explaining verbal abuse. A "linguistic injury" is an injury from the use of language. Linguistic injuries do not have its own vocabulary to draw from to describe the abuse. Instead terms from physical injuries are used to describe linguistic injuries forcing comparisons (Butler, 1997, p.4). Furthermore, language in a definition gives power to the term to exist in not only allowing that object to be recognized, but it also allows the possibility for this object to be recognizable (Butler, 1997, p.5).² A lack of a definition contributes to the weakness in the judiciary system in how the laws cannot adequately deal with verbal abuse on its own and treat it as violence.

Words are determined if they are inappropriate through the categories of intent, control and power. Intent is seen as a deliberate attack on the person's self concept rather than on the argument's position. Verbal abuse is different from argumentativeness based on how conflict is handled. Verbal argument is completely separate from verbal abuse. Control is the rule over the

² Recognized emphasizes this object has been previously been seen. Recognizable means that it was previous recognized. Recognized must take place before recognizable (dictionary.com).

other person illustrating the power in the relationship. Speech acts are dangerous in what cannot be anticipated; the person being addressed loses control (Butler, 1997, p.4). Power is found in the rhetoric and depends on the resistance in place (Sawicki 24). Foucault believes power is derived from daily life and based on social context. Power has the ability to shape our personal relations and thoughts (Harzenski, 2001, p.360).

Power of language.

Language possesses power because as linguistic beings, we are vulnerable to words (Butler, 1997, p.2). Language is multifaceted in how it can be changed, the possible effects that can be produced and viewing language as both the act and the consequences (Butler, 1997, p.8). The language injures the person in that initial moment because that insult demeans that person. Language's effects extend into creating a social existence. Butler explains how language parallels physical injuries (Butler, 1997, p.4). An insult can cause the injury right away once the words are spoken. The force in this language extends beyond its initial occurrence (Butler, 1997, p.2). When determining if words wound, the circumstances and deployment must also take into consideration who is interpreting the language, the context, and what specifically the words mean (Butler, 1997, p.13).

Foucault describes power as working together between the two forms of juridical and disciplinary power. These two forms do not compete or dominate over the other (Mertus and Rawls, 2008, p.29). Juridical power describes the actions where "might makes right." This responsive action inflicts a punishment which can be the legal response (Mertus and Rawls, 2008, p.29). The disciplinary power refers to how the body is reformed to promote submission. It is more of a preventive measure focusing on discourse. It does not take place for just criminals, but it also deters future criminals (Mertus and Rawls, 2008, p.29). The disciplinary

power incorporates the panopticon theory and biopower. Foucault references the power of observation in how it encourages people to behave as if they were being watched (Mertus & Rawls, 2008, p.30). The difference between these two power forms is illustrated in comparing the death penalty with life in prison. The death penalty is an example of juridical power in which the punishment takes place in one instance and essentially the punishment is over. Life in prison is an example of disciplinary power. The punishment extends over one's life in how the prisoner is being observed and reformed. The prisoner must live with their punishment with their life. If awareness of verbal abuse is brought to light, people may hinder their abusiveness with the chance of being held accountable.

Part of disciplinary power is biopower. This power influences one's behavior by creating our habits. Society creates and enforces this power. The norms established in society increase awareness about verbal abuse. Power comes from the norms we establish in society. Discourses are what make people who they are through the characteristics and expectations prescribed to everyone. Power defines us contributing to who we are. Biopower is constructed between these two poles: those that regulate the population and those that discipline the body. Biopower comes into play when these two areas unite. Society is regulated by biopower illustrated in the social body. Society is placed into categories. An example is the category of battered women. One can look at the language describing "battered women" to notice the emphasis on the gender of the woman rather than using a word to describe the abuser or the process. This focus on the gender clearly accentuates the distinct gender and also placing blame in the scenario (Westlund, 1999, p.1050). This category changed from being "normal" in society to being a "batter woman" excluded from social society and being treated differently.

The second part of biopower views a human body as a machine which can be influenced as explained in the panopticon theory. Biopower allows both the victim and abuser to improve or change from the situation. The victim can go to a shelter or therapy to receive protection or to learn about handling the abuse and moving forward with life. The abuser can be protected from the victim through therapy or imprisonment. These measures punish the abuser to hopefully reform the abuser for society. These examples illustrate how the disciplining of the body has the ability to be used, changed and improved.

Speech acts' effects.

The effects of abusive language can extend beyond that initial moment. Long term effects include damaged self esteem, depression or decreased motivation (Delgado & Stefancic, 2004, p.13). These consequences can cause the victim to not reach their full potential. Speech acts can have illocutionary or perlocutionary effects. Illocutionary speech acts produce their effect at the moment that the act occurs. Austin believes these produced effects are supported by social conventions in place (Butler, 1997, p.17). Perlocutionary speech act effects extend beyond the initial act and these effects could differ from the initial consequences (Butler, 1997, p.3). Austin believes effects are not produced by perlocutionary acts, but rather consequences are produced (Butler, 1997, p.17). The initial speech itself is not the effect (Butler, 1997, p.39). Verbal abuse should be viewed as not just an illocutionary act, but it also should be viewed as a possible perlocutionary speech act.

An example of both illocutionary and perlocutionary effects is demonstrated in the victim's choice to stay in a relationship. An illocutionary effect is when the victims agree to stay in the relationship during a fight. A perlocutionary effect would be for the victim to consistently remain in a relationship that is unhealthy. A common question to arise is why the victim would

remain is such a relationship. This question focuses on why the victim stayed rather than why this abuse takes place (Westlund, 1999, p.1053). This power is illustrated in the victim remaining in the relationship. The victim unconsciously enforces the relationship in place giving the abuser the power (Wood, 2001, p.217). When the verbal abuse is apparent in the relationship, one naturally believes the victim would leave that relationship. Staying in the relationship can appear that the victim is self destructive (Westlund, 1999, p.1052). However, this relationship cannot be understood without studying the context. Context affects how experiences are interpreted simplifying this categorization is that you are disregarding one's interpretation (Duck & Wood, 1995, p. 8). The victim does not realize that he or she is agreeing to the abuse. Foucault believes that everyone has their own experiences that form the truths. Truth is individual and based on the experiences that we have had. A "cycle of abuse" is established and reused over the victim (Duck & Wood, 1995, p.170). The couple's communication reinforces this pattern (Byers, Shue, & Marshall, 2004, p.44). A victim will choose to leave a relationship once this pattern changes, even if the pattern change makes the abuse less severe (Byers, Shue, & Marshall, 2004, p.49). Furthermore, there are more risky factors such as economic and safety that can contribute to the decision to stay or leave a relationship (Westlund, 1999, p.1052).

Campus speech codes.

Campus speech codes were enacted as a provision against hate speech³ on college campuses. The campus speech code movement was considered the "most successful effort in American history to restrict hate speech" (Walker, 1994, p.133), but it has not been completely accepted or successful on college campuses. These codes illustrate the difficulty in regulating

³ Hate speech is defined as severe verbal abuse that expresses hatred of an individual, social group or social groups (Hate).

forms of speech. The dispute with these codes is relevant to the conflict between the first and fourteenth amendments. The first amendment protects freedom of speech. The fourteenth amendment protects equality among people. The difficulty lies in balancing these rights. While the campus speech codes are protecting equality, the codes simultaneously decrease the free speech (Delgado & Stefancic, 2004, p.117).

Supporters of campus speech codes believe the benefits outweigh the costs. The dangers include violent response in reaction to hate speech, causing harm to the listener, offensiveness and long term effects (Greenawalt, 1995, p.50-59). Campus speech codes are needed because hate speech is found to have increased on college campuses (Delgado & Stefancic, 2004, p.22). Campus speech codes fight the verbal attacks that infringe on students and keep them from being able to concentrate. Students have the right to education without interruption (Delgado & Stefancic, 2004, p.115). The context of the university plays a dominating role in how the university represents the medium between the secondary education and childhood experience and being immersed into the real world. This real world is attributed to life after college. Mutual respect is the responsibility of the university (Greenawalt, 1995, p.73). All students should feel welcomed and not be targeted. If hate speech occurs against students, “cultural mistrust” develops. The student will not feel welcomed or develop trust towards the school (Delgado & Stefancic, 2004, p.14).

The main argument against campus speech codes is the infringement on first amendment rights. Free speech under the first amendment protects offensive words in as much that loaded terms can be part of the everyday language (Greenawalt, 1995, p.53). Campus speech codes create an artificial atmosphere with language censorship. Free speech allows freedom of expression and allows truth to be discovered. Free speech underlines the foundation of the

United States democracy (Greenawalt, 1995, p.4). Colleges are institutions for intellectual and academic quests. Campus speech code hinders the free speech that should be allowed in this journey (Delgado & Stefancic, 2004, p.111). Students fear being accused of hate speech in the classroom possibly hindering their academic exploration and study (Shiell, 1998, p.64). The actual effects of these codes are questioned to if they decrease hate speech or if these codes are simply causing hate speech to go underground (Shiell, 1998, p.68).

Campus speech codes have not been met without resistance. California enacted the Leonard Law discouraging the use of speech codes.⁴ Stanford University challenged this statute by keeping a campus speech code. In *Corry v. Stanford*, the court upheld the Leonard law and determined that Stanford University's speech code did violate free speech (Delgado & Stefancic, 2004, p.115).

Fighting words doctrine.

The Fighting Words Doctrine developed out of *Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire* and has continued to be reinterpreted since this case in 1942. This doctrine explains that fighting words are not covered by the first amendment. The five conditions for the fighting words doctrine to be enacted and keep the speech act from being protected by the first amendment are: direct personal insult, addressed to individual personally and is not to a general group, occurs face to face, words provoke immediate violent response and words provoke the individual (Mannheimer, 1993, p.1551). The context needs to be examined to determine if this speech should be restricted. The line is drawn when the speech extends to responsive violence. Speech that is generating violence should not be considered a form of self expression (Mannheimer, 1993, p.1566). The same exact wording could be protected under the First Amendment or in a different context the wording

⁴ The Leonard Law in California states that no institution can enact hate-speech code and receive state funds. Currently the Supreme Court has not decided on this case (Delgado & Stefancic, 2004, p.115).

would not be protected (Mannheimer, 1993, p.1527). This doctrine is often compared to the "the clear and present danger test" (Mannheimer, 1993, p.1531) which highlights the conditions of the context. An example is if someone was to shout "fire" in a crowded movie theater. Shouting fire would not be protected under the first amendment and could be punished because these words could cause physical harm. The "clear and present danger test" tries to prevent harmful action as the fighting words doctrine tries to keep the speaker from attacking (Mannheimer, 1993, p.1549). The fighting words doctrine is limited if the insults take place over the phone, if people are farther apart than close proximity or if the violent intent cannot be proved (Mannheimer, 1993, p.1554). The struggle with this doctrine is also in determining where the intent is and proving the motive.

Violence

Verbal abuse is violence in and of itself. The paper defines violence in response to verbal abuse. Although verbal abuse does not leave physical marks as other forms of abuse leave, it still should be considered violence with how it affects the victim. Laws are looked toward to enforce, interpret and handle violence in society. However, the law is not the best place to look to handle verbal abuse violence because of the lack of statutes in place and the judicial system is not trained to handle verbal abuse.

Violence definition.

This paper defines violence as the treatment or usage causing interference with personal freedom. Treatment is the conduct and behavior developed towards others. These behaviors are demonstrated in the different gender expectations (Wood, 1996, p.5). Going back to childhood, boys are taught to be more aggressive compared to girls being taught to be more sensitive (White & Bondurant, 1996, p.203). Usage is habit established through accepted ways and practice of

life. These previously mentioned expectations are first taught by one's family and then later reinforced by peers and through our interactions with one another (Wood, 1996, p.12). Personal freedom means being able to act without being restrained by power and truth. The difficulty lies in balancing this freedom. Often the Constitution is consulted in defining freedom. The conflict is found balancing the first and fourteenth amendments. The first amendment protects freedom of free speech. The fourteenth amendment promotes equality. The conflict arises when one wants to speak one's mind while another person wants the right to be treated fairly. One's freedom of speech may impinge on the equal of treatment of another.

Verbal abuse violence.

Given the history researching abuse, there is a tendency to distinguish violence from verbal abuse. However this verbal violence should not be distinguished from verbal abuse because this violence can be just as damaging or worse compared to physical abuse. Physical abuse happens in that moment. Bruises and scars may emerge causing the abuse to be visible to society. These visible indicators are noticed by society. Society sees physical abuse as wrong and can take these visible bruising as warning signs. Verbal abuse is just as violent, but the violence emerges as a pattern and is not as well noticed by society. Verbal abuse does not have a direct physical effect; most of the effects will be psychological or mental making it harder to be noticed. Furthermore, verbal abuse is not as well accepted as a violence as physical abuse making it less common for society to notice it.

Legal statutes.

The law is not the best place to turn to combat verbal abuse violence because there is not a clear statute in place. In the State of Virginia, the closest statute for verbal abuse is the Virginia law 18.2-416 which focuses on language that breaches the peace. It is only a class 3

misdemeanor.⁵ Rarely is this statute used on its own. It is more often added to another crime such as physical assault or stalking. This statute has not been used enough to establish a precedent regarding verbal abuse. It is still hard to legally prove verbal abuse.

Another problem in looking towards the law to handle this violence is how the law is structured. The law focuses on the illocutionary effect looking at the initial effect (Butler, 1997, p.39). It does not take into account the perlocutionary effects such as the victim's life being disrupted by the established cycle of abuse. Cases often require the context to be examined and cannot be based on just one set definition. In the law review redefining violent, "In Foucault's view, your study of power is impoverished if you concentrate exclusively on legislation, enforcement, constitutional and juridical mechanisms. Power is more complicated, denser and more pervasive than laws and the formal institutions associated with the state" (Harzenski, 2001, p.366). Studying the context is essential when researching verbal abuse.

The law's punishment does not directly affect all of society, but instead it focuses more on the speaker. Legal effort in decreasing wounding speech isolates the "speaker" as the sole agent. A greater legal effort is needed rather than just holding that particular speaker responsible when a harmful verbal act has taken place. These individuals need to be reprimanded in how the speaker reiterates verbal abuse to society when one uses it. This individual must take responsibility in repeating these words even though this individual did not originally create these words (Butler, 1997, p.39). In addition to reprimanding the individuals, additional efforts are needed for society. Society needs to have greater awareness.

⁵Virginia law 18.2-416 states "Punishment for using abusive language to another. If any person shall, in the presence or hearing of another curse or abuse such other person, or use any violent abusive language to such person concerning himself or any of his relations or otherwise use such language under circumstances reasonably calculated to provoke a breach of the peace, he shall be guilty of a Class 3 misdemeanor."

Judicial branch.

The judicial branch is not trained to handle domestic violence cases even though this branch is often the last resort for victims (Epstein 1999). The judges and clerks are unfamiliar with domestic violence and often focus on stereotypes. They do not understand and are frustrated to why victims would stay in a relationship or not see how the relationship is abusive. They are unfamiliar with how these relationships progress. Victims appear to intentionally play this role of being helpless (Epstein 1999). Those involved with the legal system are unaware that these court incidences occur in an established pattern and escalate over time. If this problem is not corrected, this problem will continue to be learned (Epstein 1999).

As explained previously in this chapter, physical abuse is much more accepted by society and has been handled more by the judicial branch. However, the provisions in place for physical abuse still have room to improve. The measures in place to address this problem such as shelters, focus and analyze the victim's action compared to focusing on the abuser (Westlund, 1999, p.1051). For example, when a victim seeks help, one may choose to stay in a shelter. This shelter provides new and unfamiliar surroundings in which the victim is placed under surveillance (Westlund, 1999, p.1049). Shelters cause women to adhere to a specific schedule and follow a strict code of conduct which also takes away part of her freedom (Westlund, 1999, p.1049, 1055). Although these are rules in place can help certain victims and provide an environment in which they can reclaim their lives (Westlund, 1999, p.1056), it also discourages victims from seeking further help in the fear of what will be taken away. These measures focus on the victim and how the victim can change compared to forcing the abuser to conform to social standards of civility.

The judicial branch is limited in what they can handle with each case. The judicial branch lacks flexibility interpreting the law causing law cases to not receive the justice they deserve. An example is in the court case *United States v. Morrison* challenged the Violence Against Women act.⁶ The victim Christy Brzonkala did not feel that Virginia Tech had adequately punished her two raping assailants, Antonio Morrison and James Crawford. These men were both on the varsity football team. Morrison still claimed the sex with Brzonkala was consensual even though she said no. The Virginia Tech Judicial Committee did not find enough evidence against Crawford, but Morrison was found guilty of sexual assault and would be suspended for two semesters. Morrison appealed this decision and was retried under a new policy “abusive conduct policy.” He was found to have used “abusive language” and again was suspended for two semesters. When Morrison appealed, his punishment was set aside by Virginia Tech’s provost because she found the punishment to be “excessive.” His new punishment would be probation and minimal counseling. Brzonkala filed suit in the federal district and Supreme courts under the Violence Against Women Act of 1994. Both courts found the Violence Against Women Act to be unconstitutional on the basis of the Commerce Clause and Section 5 of the Fourteenth Amendment.⁷ The Supreme Court’s opinion of the Court emphasized that gendered base violence should be handled at the state level (Epstein & Walker, 2007, p.475). Brzonkala sued Virginia Tech for sex discrimination and settled out of court (Epstein & Walker, 2007, p.475). Brzonkala received \$75,000, but Virginia Tech did not admit they were wrong. The problem that arises with this ruling is that Brzonkala did not receive justification in this act. Her abusers were able to walk away from this act.

Conclusion

⁶ This act allowed the victims of gendered motivated violence to sue in the federal courts under the Commerce Clause and Equal Protection Clause. This act was ruled unconstitutional because Congress did not have the right under those clauses.

⁷ Section 5 is gives Congress the power to enforce the legislation

Verbal abuse must be recognized as violence in itself. Its history of illocutionary or perlocutionary effects clearly reinforced the violence definition. It should not only be seen as merely a condition before the actual abuse, but as actual abuse in and of itself. Verbal abuse is an evident problem in today's society and better provisions are needed. A clear definition and category needs to be established and taught to the community to increase the awareness and prevent verbal abuse from continuing to take place. This effort will be difficult as previously illustrated by the hardships faced by the speech regulation acts of campus speech acts and the fighting words doctrine.

This research illustrated the obligation to engage in research surrounding verbal abuse and its effects. After exploring the legal systems in place, I do not advocate for anarchy, but rather more helpful legal solutions that focus on verbal abuse itself rather than the victim. This verbal abuse epidemic cannot solely be solved through new laws. These weaknesses in the laws and judicial system expose how verbal abuse is a violence in itself and the community needs to be educated. This research will explore the narratives utilized to make sense of, enforce and disrupt the view of verbal abuse.

CHAPTER 2

Review of Literature

Verbal Abuse Definition

As found in the law review cases, the prevalence and use of verbal abuse is a relatively new concept in today's society and as such it lacks a universal definition or even an agreed upon label. Verbal abuse has been categorized as a "destructive form of communication" (Infante & Rancer, 1996, p. 321), "intimate violence" (Duck & Wood, 1995, p.140), "nonphysical abuse, maltreatment, psychological aggression, verbal aggression, emotional abuse, controlling behaviors, competitive behaviors and psychological torture" (Marshall, 1996, p.380). Verbal abuse has been described as a type of domestic violence. The National Domestic Violence website defines domestic violence as having "a pattern of behavior in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner" and recognizes the many forms that abuse can take such as "physical, sexual, emotional, economic or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person" (National Domestic Violence Hotline). Classifying verbal abuse as "domestic violence" indicates that this crime is more likely to occur among those who have a relationship and in a private place compared to between strangers in public places (Duck & Wood, 1995, p. 140).

Verbal abuse itself has not been clearly defined. Having an unclear definition for verbal abuse hinders our communication about the topic. A definition is needed to empower the communication that will surround it. Communication constructs social expectations and personal identities (Wood, 1996, p.11). According to Foucault, communication creates this social reality by identifying the experience and creating the meaning (Wood, 1996, p.12). Foucault believes while learning one's language, culture values are being learned. This connection causes the

ways of society to be enforced through our thoughts and actions (Wood, 1996, p.13). Our language molds how we observe our experiences as found by Spender (Wood, 1996, p.12).

Furthermore, this lack of a clear definition increases the difficulty in classifying acts of verbal abuse. Drawing the line between playful teasing and teasing causing psychological pain is hard. Duck and Wood have distinguished teasing from playfulness based on one's intent (Duck & Wood, 1995, p. 14). The amount of control plays a role in determining if the interaction is verbal abuse. When there is a demand for constant control, Duck and Wood determine the relationship as being too violent (Duck & Wood, 1995, p. 137). Similarly, intent helps differentiate verbal abuse from conflicts and argumentativeness. Verbal abuse is an attack on one's self-concept rather than one's position (Weger, 2006, p. 31, Burleson, 1996, p. xvii, Infante & Rancer, 1996, p. 321, Byers, Shue, & Marshall, 2004, p.45, Infante, Riddle, Horvath & Tumlin, 1992, p.116). This verbal or nonverbal attack is deliberately hurting the other person with words or with symbolic actions (Lane & Gwartney-Gibbs, 1985, p. 49, Stets & Henderson, 1991, p. 29). Ten types of verbally aggressive messages that have been identified include "character attacks, competence attacks, background attacks, physical appearance attacks, maledictions, teasing, ridicule, threats, swearing and nonverbal emblems" (Infante, Riddle, Horvath & Tumlin, 1992, p.117). A clear definition and classification of verbal abuse is needed to be able to effectively discuss the subject.

Key Limitations in Current Research

In addition to verbal abuse being ambiguously defined, it is not consistently recognized as a form of abuse by society (Bhatt, 2008, p. 168). When verbal abuse is unknown in society, people will be unable to recognize and distinguish what makes up verbal abuse (Infante, Riddle, Horvath & Tumlin, 1992, p.124). The abuser could possibly be unaware that he or she is

inflicting a type of abuse and may unknowingly continue this cycle (Yelsma, 1995, p. 103).

Verbal abuse is often pushed aside and portrayed as a “woman’s issue.” However the victims are not all women, and the effect of verbal abuse extends beyond the victim (Byers, Shue, & Marshall, 2004, p.43).

Even though verbal abuse can affect everyone, there is a lack of legal authority to deal with verbal abuse found in relationships or in the workplace. Fighting verbal abuse in the court system is difficult because there are not sufficient laws in place. In the state of Virginia, there is one statute applicable to solely verbal abuse.⁸ The punishment is only a misdemeanor. It is challenging to prove only verbal abuse because there is not physical evidence and it will usually depend largely on one’s testimony. Verbal abuse cases are often coupled with other abuse such as physical abuse or stalking. Mental abuse has been found to progress into physical abuse. In the workplace, verbal abuse is hard to deal with as well. Under Title VII, the victims are not protected by federal law unless patterns of discrimination can be proven which is often difficult to do (Saunders, 1999, p.7).⁹

Rather than society teaching what verbal abuse is or how to deal with it, those speaking out against abuse are silenced and pressured to stay in the violent relationship (Duck & Wood, 1995, p. 130, 141). Awareness of verbal abuse is needed to promote further options for the victim. Both males and females would benefit by further developing effective communication skills for their relationships which would help reduce the verbal abuse pattern and other forms of violence in the intimate relationships (Yelsma, 1995, p. 111). Without improving communication skills, this pattern of verbal abuse will continue.

⁸ As stated in chapter 1, this statute is found in Article 3 Abusive and Insulting Language 18.2-416 Punishment for Using Abusive Language to Another. This statute states, “If any person shall, in the presence or hearing of another, curse or abuse such other person, or use any violent abusive language to such person concerning himself or any of his relations or otherwise use such language, under circumstances reasonably calculated to provoke a breach of the peace, he be guilty of a Class 3 misdemeanor. (VA art. 3, § 18.2-416).

⁹ Title VII prohibits harassment and discrimination in the workplace.

This cycle of violence needs to end because research has found that the effects of verbal abuse effects extend beyond the relationship and can progress to other forms of abuse. Verbal abuse increases the likelihood to become involved with risky behaviors (Roberts, Auinger, & Klein, 2006, p. 81). Even after a verbally abusive relationship ends, its effects can possibly develop into PTSD (Marshall, 1996, 380). This cycle of violence found in premarital conflict can continue into marital relationships (Infante, Riddle, Horvath & Tumlin, 1992, p.126) illustrating the need for these patterns to be studied and stopped prior to marriage. This violence can continue to progress into physical violence. Verbal abuse can contribute to physical intimate violence that may ultimately end in death: half of women's murders are executed by a current or former partner (White & Bondurant, 1996, p. 205).¹⁰

Verbal Abuse Characteristics

Even with the possible harmful and frightening consequences stemming from verbal abuse, the causes and characteristics of verbal abuse are still being discovered in research. Verbal abuse can be caused from “psychopathology, disdain, social learning and argumentative skill deficiencies” (Infante & Rancer, 1996, p. 323, Infante, Riddle, Horvath & Tumlin, 1992, p.118). Verbal abuse is a learned behavior through intimate interactions such as personal experiences or through frequent contact with verbal abuse participants (Gwartney-Gibbs, Stockard, & Bohmer, 1987, p.276, 280, 281). Often it takes place in a private setting, and demoralizes and decreases the victim's self worth (Saunders, 1999, p.7).

The effects of verbal abuse are unique to each person depending on the pattern (Marshall, 1996, p.401) and the role of power in the relationship. Verbal abuse initially affects the victim psychologically whether the abuser has attacked one's “perceptions, thoughts, feelings, or

¹⁰ Women can commit murders as well, but theirs tend to be more in response to being abused (White & Bondurant, 1996, p. 206).

behavior” possibly causing her viewpoints, attitudes and self concept to change (Marshall, 1996, 380). Negative feelings can develop such as guilt, embarrassment, inadequacy, breaking other relationships, despair, feeling of inadequacy, increase in risky behaviors and depression (Marshall, 1996, 385, Yelsma, 1995, p. 101, Infante & Rancer, 1996, p. 323, Roberts, Auinger, & Klein, 2006, p. 82, Infante, Riddle, Horvath & Tumlin, 1992, p.116). Power plays an influencing role in all relationships (Duck & Wood, 1995, p. 132). Foucault attributes that knowledge cannot be separated from power (Duck & Wood, 1995, p. 134). The issue of power influences the individual’s view of one’s relationship (Duck & Wood, 1995, p. 131). The struggle for power can escalate the abuse (Byers, Shue, & Marshall, 2004, p.45). The attack on one’s self-concept revolves around one’s “group membership, personal failings or relational failings” (Infante & Rancer, 1996, p. 323). This negativity is often overlooked in the relationship in how those in the relationship have become codependent and organize their lives at any cost around the relationship (Duck & Wood, 1995, p.3, 109).

When determining verbal abuse, conflict is often mistaken to be synonymous with verbal abuse. Not all conflict is verbally abusive. The way conflict is handled reflects if the relationship is destructive (Winstead, Derlega & Rose, 1997, p.88). Verbally abusive relationships can be characterized by a tendency to argue with their partner (Weger, 2006, p. 29) and ineffective expression of emotions (Yelsma, 1995, p. 100). These inadequate argumentative skills promote verbal abuse (Byers, Shue, & Marshall, 2004, p.45). The chances of verbal abuse increase if the relationship is seen as having lower quality and commitment (Byers, Shue, & Marshall, 2004, p.43). These relationships which have verbal abuse can still be considered constructive and functional (Yelsma, 1995, p.111).

Abuser and Victim Profiles

Just as the characteristics for verbal abuse are unclear, there is not a profile for the verbal abuser and victims in these relationships (Infante, Riddle, Horvath & Tumlin, 1992, p.117).

Verbal abuse has been found to be more of a pattern rather than arising from a violent background (Duck & Wood, 1995, p. 169). The abuser will not necessarily be abusive outside the relationship (Duck & Wood, 1995, p. 169). The verbal abuser's characteristics include being anxiously attached, overreacting with their partners, fearing rejection (Weger, 2006, p. 33) or sensing their emotions are being misunderstood (Yelsma, 1995, p.101). The abuser may have contempt for the victim, want to appear as "tough" in crowds or prevent losing face (Infante & Rancer, 1996, p. 323, Duck & Wood, 1995, p. 39). The role of the abuser could switch places with the victim depending on his or her role in the situation (Duck & Wood, 1995, p. 169). Past research has often been more focused on the abuser's behaviors rather than the victim's characteristics (Yelsma, 1995, p.102).

The victim has been found to be typically female while the abuser is male (Duck & Wood, 1995, p. 170). Research disagrees if verbal abuse happens more to males or females (Shook, Gerrity, Jurich & Segrist, 2000, p.2). Males and females have been inconsistent in reporting the verbal abuse. However, females are more likely to report that verbal abuse had occurred. After the abuse, the female victims were found to be more scared, helpless, depressed and uncertain in feeling loved (Follingstad, Wright & Sebastian, 1991, p.52). The victim is often classified as not "normal" or "those women;" this stigma makes it hard for others to understand their experience (DiQuinzio & Young, 1997, p.165, Duck & Wood, 1995, p. 146). If the victim has already experienced verbal abuse, they are at a psychological disadvantage (DiQuinzio & Young, 1997, p.165) especially if verbal abuse were to begin again.

Profiles for abusers and victims are hard to establish because of the reciprocal nature that tends to develop. Women and men reported verbal and physical aggression towards dating partners in equal amounts (White & Bondurant, 1996, p. 203). Often a pattern arose in which partners will reciprocate verbal abuse in their exchange of words (Byers, Shue, & Marshall, 2004, p.45, Infante, Riddle, Horvath & Tumlin, 1992, p.118, Yelsma, 1995, p.102). Similar amount of reporting of verbal abuse were reported by the males and females (Shook, Gerrity, Jurich & Segrist, 2000, p.15, Yelsma, 1995, p.109). This reciprocation makes the abuse in the relationship even more severe (Roberts, Auinger, & Klein, 2006, p. 88).

Choice to Remain in Relationship

When studying verbally abusive relationships, the victims are often questioned as to why they choose to stay in a verbally abusive relationship. Leaving the relationship is difficult because of the delay in identifying the abuse and the established pattern of abuse. The abusive relationship cannot be interpreted out of its environment. Experiences are made sense of depending on the context (Duck & Wood, 1995, p. 8). Although the victim has a choice to leave the relationship, outside influences play a role in the decision. Choice is a concept constructed by society (Shanley & Narayan, 1997, p.194).

When a victim remains in the relationship after the abuse has occurred, the victim unconsciously agrees to the abuser's power and control by not leaving (Wood, 2001, p.217). This pattern becomes reinforced and preserved through the couple's communication (Byers, Shue, & Marshall, 2004, p.44). "Promise strategies" are used by the abuser to convince the victim to keep believing in him or her (Duck & Wood, 1995, p. 170). The word "love" could be used to convince the relationship to try to stay together (Byers, Shue, & Marshall, 2004, p.49). More attention will be drawn to staying committed to their relationship because of the amount of

time and effort established in the relationship (Byers, Shue, & Marshall, 2004, p.44, 49). Women often chose to focus on the behaviors that are positive, which can act as a defense against the present negative behaviors (Byers, Shue, & Marshall, 2004, p.49). Typically if a victim chooses to leave the relationship, it is when the pattern of violence changes even if it had been more severe and frequent before (Byers, Shue, & Marshall, 2004, p.49).

Connections with Physical Abuse

When verbal abuse has been studied, it has been studied in connection to physical abuse. Physical abuse is often preceded by verbal abuse (Infante, Riddle, Horvath & Tumlin, 1992, p.118) with verbal abuse providing the context for physical abuse (Stets & Henderson, 1991, p. 29). Verbal abuse can serve as a predictor for physical abuse (Marshall, 1996, p.380, Stets & Henderson, 1991, p. 35) or even act as a catalyst (Byers, Shue, & Marshall, 2004, p.45) possibly “exploding” into the physical abuse (Infante, Riddle, Horvath & Tumlin, 1992, p.118). Verbal aggressiveness was reported at a higher rate (80-88%) compared to physical aggressiveness (35-39%) (White & Bondurant, 1996, p. 203). Verbal’s abuse’s connection with physical abuse has been established, yet there still remains a limited amount of literature focused solely on verbal abuse due to its sensitive nature (Yelsma, 1995, p. 110).

Those at Risk

Verbally abusive relationships are not found to affect a specific group. Research suggests different factors contribute to verbally abusive relationships. All relationships have the possibility of becoming verbally abusive; the more serious the relationship and length of relationship increases the likelihood of verbal abuse (Infante, Riddle, Horvath, & Tumlin, 1992, p.129, Roberts, Auinger, & Klein, 2006, p.81, 88). While studying partner violence¹¹ in young

¹¹ Physical violence was included in their definition of partner violence. The study cited did not separate verbal and physical violence in their data.

adults, the risk for partner violence increased for those of a lower socioeconomic status, lower academic achievements, of divorced parents, those with exposure to violence, those with more relationships (Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin & Kupper, 2001, p.1679) and involvement in a sexual relationship (Roberts, Auinger, & Klein, 2006, p.81).

Role of Gender

Throughout the study of verbal abuse, gender continued to arise as a role in verbal abuse. Different expectations and characteristics based on gender have been taught by family, friends, the media and society (Wood, 1996, p.5). Our communication teaches, defines and reinforces who men and women are (Wood, 1996, p.6, 12). Starting in childhood, boys are taught to use aggression as a means of control while girls are taught to be submissive and uneasy around men. Even children's chores reflect the expectations of society (Wood, 1996, p.8). Boys will be given the active outdoor chores like cutting the grass, while the girls will be inside cooking and cleaning. These characteristics can teach women that men have an entitlement over them (White & Bondurant, 1996, p. 203). The gender stereotypes taught by the family continue to be reinforced by one's peers (Wood, 1996, p.12). These lessons influence behaviors continuing into adulthood (White & Bondurant, 1996, p. 202) as society teaches male dominance in the structure of dating; men should ask out the girl and pay for their date (White & Bondurant, 1996, p. 204). Women are taught to be more sensitive in relationships compared to men who should be competitive and less sensitive (Wood, 1996, p.4). Both men and women have seen abuse as a male's choice in a relationship (Wood, 1996, p.13).

Gender is further learned within our relationships through our interactions and comparisons of ourselves to one another (Wood, 1996, p.10). Gender plays both the role in producing the relationship and being influenced by it (Wood, 1996, p.4). However, the role of

gender is not completely set and could be changed if these stereotypes evolve (Wood, 1996, p.15).

Particular Audience

Based on this research illustrating gender as a primary factor in abusive relationships, I chose to focus my research on females. Gender should be separated because of the stereotypes created by society and the differences needed to study them. Once gender is identified other characteristics become expected (Kramarae, 1996, p. 21). The expectancies cause different behaviors (Winstead, Derlega & Rose, 1997, p.95). To accommodate for these differences, males and females may need differing options. The levels of abuse by males involve different factors and motivations compared to those of females making it harder to study both sexes together (Yelsma, 1995, p.109, Follingstad, Wright, Lloyd & Sebastian, 1991, p.55). Reasons and effects differ between men and women in how women are more likely to be harmed and feel “surprised, scared, angry and hurt” due to the partner’s aggression (White & Bondurant, 1996, p. 203).

Furthermore, research has found that the victims of emotional and physically damaging violence tend to be women rather than men in intimate relationships. Females often see themselves more often as the victim (McKinney, 1986, p.56). Females have been found to be more aware of their effect on their emotional expressions (Yelsma, 1995, p.102). Women are more likely to experience aggressive behaviors as losing emotional control, feeling anxiety and guilt, compared to men who find aggression satisfying and an effective means of control (White & Bondurant, 1996, p. 202). Typically, women know and trust these men who are the aggressors (White & Bondurant, 1996, p.197-198). The victim blames herself in these crimes (White & Bondurant, 1996, p. 199-200). Women commit aggressive and violent acts towards men but

with less serious consequences and with different effects on the men (White & Bondurant, 1996, p. 198). If the abuser is a female they often see themselves as acting in self defense compared to males being seen as intimidators (Follingstad, Wright, Lloyd & Sebastian, 1991, p.51).

Sexuality.

Gottman found that homosexual relationship conflict management differed from that in heterosexual relationships (Winstead, Derlega & Rose, 1997, p.97). The majority of research on relationship violence has been focused on heterosexual couples (Winstead, Derlega & Rose, 1997, p.108). Past heterosexist bias due to our culture's emphasis in researching "couples" as a man and woman provide more research to draw from (White & Bondurant, 1996, p. 198). There is a smaller population to draw from as there is a lack of lesbian and gay couples to research. Some of this is due to the entire population is approximately made up of 20-37% gay men and 13-20% lesbian women (White & Bondurant, 1996, p. 198). Male-female differences are not as prominent in homosexual relationships as compared to heterosexual relationships (Wood, 2001, p.206).

Age.

There is a lack of research regarding the nonresidential dating relationships, which is also the most common relationship during college (Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin & Kupper, 2001, p.1679). Violence has been found to be more common in the early adulthood stages (Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin & Kupper, 2001, p.1679). In studying the high school and college age, partner violence increased with age (Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin & Kupper, 2001, p.1679). The abuse that occurs later in life could be building up with age, which means it begins earlier in life (Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin & Kupper, 2001, p.1684). These studies illustrate the need to conduct research in the college age group.

Ethnicity and class.

Past research has been limited by ethnicity and class in that white behavior has dominated what is “normal” in society (White & Bondurant, 1996, p. 198). It is also harder to gain access to poorer classes to study since a majority of research is conducted on college students who tend to be at least middle class (White & Bondurant, 1996, p. 198).

Review of Methodological Approaches

The majority of past research on verbal abuse has used scales to conduct the research. The most common scale has been the conflict tactics scale (CTS) (Roberts, Aunger, & Klein, 2006, p. 83; Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin & Kupper, 2001, p.1680; Lane & Gwartney-Gibbs, 1985, p. 47; McKinney, 1986, p.55; Stets & Henderson, 1991, p. 30; Follingstad, Wright, Lloyd & Sebastian, 1991, p.52; Marshall, 1996, p. 381; Shook, Gerrity, Jurich & Segrist, 2000, p.1; Winstead, Derlega & Rose, 1997, p.100; Infante, Riddle, Horvath, & Tumlin, 1992, p.131). Other popular scales have included the Verbal Aggressiveness Scale (Infante, Riddle, Horvath & Tumlin, 1992, p.119; Weger, 2006, p. 34; Infante & Rancer, 1996, p. 324), Infante and Rancer’s Argumentativeness Scale (Weger, 2006, p. 34, Infante & Rancer, 1996, p. 324), and the Severity of Violence Against Women Scale which measured both the physical and nonphysical aspects of relationships (Byers, Shue, & Marshall, 2004, p.47, (Marshall, 1996, p.380).

Conclusion

The prior research involving scales used self reporting and was unable to explore the dialogue in which verbal abuse was discussed. Through this review of literature, the limitations are as follows: verbal abuse being unrecognized, having this issue be considered a “woman’s issue,” lack of legal authority, the silencing of victims and the remaining aftereffects of verbally abusive relationships. A limited understanding remains in general even as the emphasis has been

placed on studying the victim and through the questioning to why one would remain in the verbally abusive relationship. This research illustrates the need for continual research on verbal abuse specifically involving college relationships and solely verbal abuse. In the next chapter, I examine the methods used to conduct this research.

CHAPTER 3

Methods

To study this subject of verbal abuse, I conducted my research using qualitative methods. Qualitative research realizes words are just the beginning. Qualitative research is enhanced by examining one's voice intensity, body language, and self-presentation (Langer, 2001, p.5). I explored stories women told about verbal abuse. My interest was not necessarily in their stories about their experiences; rather I was interested in how verbal abuse was generally discussed. While learning these women's stories, I also observed how they conducted themselves in discussing this topic. Their tone, body language and language impacted their message. The majority of past research on this topic used scales and was self reported.

However to achieve my goal in exploring how verbal abuse is discussed, I needed to focus on the personalized experience prompting me to take a person-centered approach. Focusing on the person prevented grouping individuals together and marginalizing their experience (Duck & Wood, 1995, p. 140). This approach did not use self-reporting which could limit the experiences shared (Weger, 2006, p. 38, Yelsma, 1995, p.110). A person-centered approach strengthens the research, allowing for individual differences to be observed. Looking at specific characteristics allows further analysis regarding the specifics of situations and the person (Infante, Riddle, Horvath & Tumlin, 1992, p.117).

To explore women's narratives involving verbal abuse, focus groups and interviews were used. Focus groups allowed for dialogue to emerge among peers as they discussed verbal abuse. This group setting encouraged interaction among the participants to further dialogue about their understanding about the issue (Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000, p.69-70). These groups also had the possibility of simulating into support groups, allowing the respondent to be more open with their

peers as opposed to being questioned by a single interviewer (Langer, 2001, p.36). Focus groups allowed for a semi structured interview format, giving the interviewer flexibility to accordingly adjust the focus based on the participants' interactions (Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000, p.69-70). This flexible structure allowed the important topics to be covered, but it also allowed for the participants to take the dialogue in their own direction (Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000, p.72-73). Being in a focus group promoted credibility in the dialogue among peers (Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000, p.69-70). During focus groups, nonverbal material was also observed to see if their behavior contradicted their verbal response (Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000, p.69-70).

Individual interviews were combined with focus groups to allow for more in-depth research to take place (Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000, p.69-70). The additional interviews allowed quieter participants to contribute more and allowed certain issues to be emphasized (Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000, p.70); additionally more personal information could be extracted (Geiger & Fischer, 2006, p.341). An advantage to the interview following the focus group was that the interview could focus on the specific research purpose that had surfaced in the previous focus group (Shute, Owens, & Slee, 2007, p.480). These interviews took place after the focus group. The focus group had focused on the societal view which allowed the interview to be more personalized and explore specific topics more in-depth.

Interviews with key informants were also conducted to gain a greater perspective on the dynamics of campus. These key informants were leaders from the university who participated in domestic violence awareness and/or had observed abuse on campus. These key informant interviews provided further background about the culture of this campus, but also provided key insight with how the administration views and deals with verbal abuse.

Participants

Participants were recruited through an email sent to all Westhampton College women inviting them to participate in focus groups discussing difficult relationships (see Appendix A). The email was sent to Westhampton College students by the researcher. The first 20 women to respond were accepted into the focus groups. Within a half hour of sending the email, 29 women had responded. As an incentive five twenty dollar gift certificates were given out to random participants. Volunteers were recruited for the study. Volunteers rather than requiring certain participants gained a sample more similar to the population that would be seeking relationship counseling due to them being willing to talk about their experience (Marshall, 1996, p.405). Participants who volunteer tend to be more willing to speak out about this difficult topic which has the possibility of a selection bias (Esteban, 2006, p. 255). At the beginning of focus groups and interviews, consent forms were signed to indicate voluntary participation and also the right for the participant to stop at any time (Esteban, 2006, p. 249) (See Appendix B). Throughout the study, participants were reminded that they would not have to speak about personal experience if they did not wish to (Phillips, 2008, p.161-162). The participants were also ensured of confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms (Geiger & Fischer, 2006, p.341), participants were referred to through participants numbers, access to the videotapes and audiotapes were only allowed by myself and my thesis advisor, and the focus groups and interviews took place in private settings.

The participant pool drew from the female population of a small, private liberal arts university located in the mid-Atlantic. These participants were current students. The population of the school is disproportionately Caucasian.

Procedure

To explore these women's stories regarding verbal abuse, I conducted focus groups and interviews with college women. I chose to be the moderator and interviewer because I had invested my time in researching this area and felt personally connected to the subject. I researched this subject for ten months before the focus groups and interview took place. I also had routinely been meeting with my thesis advisor and had a thesis committee meeting to prepare myself for discussing this difficult task. I gained IRB approval for my project (See Appendix E) and met with the Director of University of Richmond Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS). I felt all these steps were necessary so that I would be prepared to carry out a healthy and productive discussion with my participants.

The focus group began with an introduction and reminder of confidentiality and not feeling pressured to speak. I read the hypothetical situation statement out loud and each participant was provided with a hard copy (see Appendix C). I wrote this hypothetical with the help of my thesis advisor and based it off of my personal experiences from a past verbally abusive relationship. I changed some experiences to make a more coherent story, but these experiences were essentially real. In fact, one of the participants in a focus group who had admitted to being in an abusive relationship commented on the hypothetical:

P8: Whoever did this (point to the page in front of her) is pretty good... I've been there in this exact situation

I opened the focus group dialogue with the initial question of "what do you think?" This question began the conversation and I only had to interject other questions approximately two to three times per focus group and only if there was a prolonged silence. The purpose of the focus group was to see how women talked to each other about verbal abuse. I did not have an agenda

with set objectives, rather I wanted to explore where the focus group would take the subject. I was prepared with further questions in case the focus group lacked discussion; however, I only asked a few follow up questions and did not have to introduce new ideas into the conversation. The dialogue that took place was determined by the focus group participants.

Four focus groups were planned with five members per each group. One focus group consisted of only four focus group members because one participant missed the meeting. The focus groups were arranged based on time availability. These focus groups were conducted in the University of Richmond Speech Center to allow for videotaping. The participants were informed by me of the videotaping and they could physically see the camera in place. I reassured them that only I and my thesis advisor would have access to these conversations. Videotaping allowed observation of the group interaction in their conversation and also allowed for focused examination of their nonverbal communication, including body movements, facial expressions and physical interaction to one another. The Speech Center is technologically set up for unobtrusive videotaping of interaction. The room was closed off allowing for privacy and decreasing distractions for the participants.

After all the focus groups were conducted, I invited four individuals from the focus groups to participate in individual interviews. I also conducted an interview with the one participant who missed her focus group time. These one on one interviews required additional consent. The interviews were audio taped in private settings throughout campus. All participants who participated in the focus groups were provided information regarding University of Richmond Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), University of Richmond Student Health Center, University of Richmond Office of Chaplaincy, University Police, the Westhampton College Dean's Office and an off campus resource, the YWCA. They were also

provided materials from CAPS about issues regarding relationships (see Appendix D). During the focus groups and interviews, I specifically did not mention the term “verbal abuse” until after it had been brought up by a participant. I was interested in studying at what point women began to identify certain communication as abusive.

As the focus groups developed, I realized my research would be strengthened through key informant interviews. I conducted four key informant interviews with leaders around campus. These key informant interviews were started after the second focus group and continued throughout the interviewing time as well. The key informant interviewees were chosen based on their experience or position held at the university. The informants included the men’s associate dean who brought the white ribbon campaign¹² to campus, the men’s associate dean who was the previous advisor for the on campus group Student Voices Against Violence, the president of the on campus group Student Voices Against Violence and who brought the red flag campaign¹³ to campus and an on campus police lieutenant.

Focus Groups

The focus groups’ discussion followed the dialogue’s path (Phillips, 2008, p.161-162). I carried out these discussions as the moderator (Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000, p.72). Open ended questions furthered the discussion (Esteban, 2006, p. 249). Additional scenarios were written in case the dialogue did not progress on its’ own. Writing a scenario allowed for the introduction to be less intimidating (Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000, p.72-73). However, this discussion did not require these additional examples to spark dialogue. The conversation flowed throughout all the focus groups. Silences were allowed to occur, but they were not prolonged. Questions revolved around what the participants saw happen, their justification for it, behavior effects and what

¹² The White Ribbon Campaign is a campaign specifically focused on men ending men’s violence against women.

¹³ The Red Flag Campaign is a statewide awareness campaign in Virginia about dating violence on college campuses. This campaign is now being extended across the nation.

should be done about it (Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000, p.72-73). I did not use the specific term of verbal abuse until a participant had stated it to avoid bias (Shute, Owens, & Slee, 2007, p. 480). Abuse was specifically mentioned in two focus groups. The focus groups ended when sufficient issues stop emerging (Shute, Owens, & Slee, 2007, p. 480). They lasted for approximately 45 minutes to an hour. To respect the participants' time, the focus groups ended after an hour because the email stated that they would last no longer than one hour. Three of the focus groups had to be forced ended even though the dialogue was still developing. One focus group ended ten minutes before an hour had passed by the conversation subsiding.

Interviews

After the focus group ended, an invitation to continue this discussion was offered to participants by inviting them to be interviewed one on one (Esteban, 2006, p. 249, Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000, p.72). This oral invitation was offered at the end of the focus group. No follow up email was sent. I selected four focus group respondents based on their participation within the group. For example, I interviewed the participant who used told a friend's story of abuse, but then later admitted that friend was her. I interviewed an extremely vocal participant who had had a lot of experience in verbally abusive relationships. Another participant had been studying this issue of domestic violence and women's rights through her majors. My fourth interviewee was a quieter participant who was overshadowed by her focus group members, but I thought she would have more to share on the topic. One additional interview was conducted with a participant who had missed her original focus group meeting.

These interviews began with me reminding the participants that they only need to talk when comfortable and by asking, "Have you noticed anything since the focus group?" Follow up questions were guided by what the participant chose to talk about. The participants were

easily able to pick up the conversation even though it had been a couple weeks between the focus groups and the interviews. Interviews were private and lasted approximately between 30-45 minutes. The interviews focused on the hypothetical situation and the issues that emerged during the focus groups. The interview provided an environment for the participants to share more information that they may not have previously felt comfortable to do so in a group setting. This individualized attention allowed for the participant to expand on her views and experiences. More details expanded on experiences mentioned in focus groups. No new experiences were shared in the interviews that differed from the focus groups. The topics mentioned in the focus groups were consistently referenced by the participant.

The key informant interviews provided a greater understanding of how university administration deals with the subject of verbal abuse. The key informant interviews were conducted to gain the administration's point of view to develop a fuller understanding of verbal abuse. The key informants were chosen in their participant with a domestic violence awareness or student group. I was interested to see what connection or disconnect would emerge based on how the key informants and participants discussed verbal abuse.

Focus Group and Interview Analysis

After the focus groups and interviews were completed, the audiotapes and videotapes were transcribed for each focus group and each interview. To maintain confidentiality, participants were given numbers throughout the transcripts. This transcription was imperative to allow for thematic analysis. Being able to read the transcripts allowed for themes to emerge and be recategorized as more data was collected (Shute, Owens, & Slee, 2007, p. 480-481) and to allow multiple listenings. Transcripts were listened and read simultaneously. The exact wording of the participants was transcribed including any slang terms, verbal fillers and/or stuttering. I

engaged in multiple readings of the transcripts and coded themes as they emerged throughout the readings. These themes were identified through the comparison of the different narratives finding similar experiences and meanings. Themes emerged from the narratives and the narrative developed as the dialogue progressed (Bhatt, 2008, p. 161). Once the themes were broadly coded, some smaller themes became connected because of their similarities. I narrowed my focus on the five most salient themes based on which ones truly explored how the narrative surrounding verbal abuse was discussed. The focus group and participant interviews were coded together and key informant interviewers were coded separately.

Confidentiality

The topic being studied was extremely sensitive in nature causing confidentiality to be a primary concern. In order to assure participant confidentiality, pseudonyms were utilized in all write-ups of this study. Before each focus group and interview, I reminded all participants that they would not be identified in this study. I did not collect any demographic data and I only referred to race if the participant mentioned it as part of her narrative. Also because my interest was in how these narratives were constructed, I used composite narratives to explain certain themes in which I took streams of stories from various participants to construct a sample story in which no individual participant was identifiable.

Conclusion

The qualitative methods I employed allowed me to gain insight in how verbal abuse was discussed by my participants and the administration. The structure of the focus groups and interviews allowed the strictest confidentiality to be maintained while also allowing the discussion to naturally progress. Overarching themes emerged from the audiotapes and videotapes after several readings of the transcripts and analysis of dialogue.

CHAPTER 4

Examination of Themes

Themes continue to emerge and develop through the progression of the participants' dialogue in the focus groups and participant interviews. The dialogue began with the reading of a hypothetical situation (see below). The hypothetical was written to not directly reference verbal abuse, but provide enough grey area to initiate conversation. I was not looking for a specific direction for the topics to emerge and be discussed. As mentioned in the method section, I specifically asked "what do you think?" to begin the dialogue.

The dialogue began with the initial question of what the participants thought about the hypothetical, but the conversation soon became more personalized as the participants evoked personal or friends' experiences. 31 initial themes emerged (Appendix F) from the focus groups and one-on-one interviews. Five of these themes were identified as the most salient to the research and were analyzed further. These five themes include: (1) how to protect one's identity, (2) characteristics of the victim, (3) rationalizing the behavior, (4) tipping point and (5) outside perspective.

Hypothetical

I met John at the first football game of the year and we are now getting ready to go on spring break. Once we started hanging out, all my hall mates couldn't tell me enough nice things about him. Not only was he cute, but he is also known for being one of the nicest guys on campus. I feel like we are the celebrity couple on campus. To make it even better for every possible anniversary, he gives me the most thoughtful presents. Plus, John has already promised me next Christmas we can go skiing at his family's condo.

We have had our ups and downs as all couples do on campus, but John is so special. I don't know what I would do without him. He helped me figure out what I wanted to do in life. At first I was hurt when he told me my dream of being a social worker was stupid and that I wouldn't amount to anything, but now I realize that the business world is better in today's economy. We finally figured out my schedule so that we take morning classes together and study together in

the afternoon and night. Before he called me lazy because I preferred to take afternoon classes and sleep in. With such similar schedules, it is so much fun having all my meals with him. I don't have to anxiously call my friends to avoid eating alone.

Each week I go to chapter, my sorority sisters keep complaining how they don't see me anymore. I don't go out as much on the weekend. I just don't have as much energy. I'm lucky I already have the boyfriend while my friends are still looking for theirs. When I go out with the girls, John complains that I am dressing too slutty telling me my short skirts and tight shirts make me look like a prostitute and a whore rather than his girlfriend. I don't mind changing my wardrobe around. The fights just aren't worth it and it's just easier for me to hang out with him. John pointed out to me that I spend enough time with my hall mates because I live with them. My roommate has mentioned that John has a lot of jealousy, but John only acts this way because of how much he loves me. It's sweet that John wants to spend all his time with me. He pays so much attention that even if we aren't supposed to be hanging out he'll show up to the events I go to with my friends. A few of my friends get angry, but they are too protective of me and overreact to situations. One time my hall mates caught us arguing outside my dorm with him cursing at me telling me to fuck off. I was crying and was slightly embarrassed for them to see me upset, but they just didn't understand that it was my fault the fight even happened in the first place.

Lately, I don't know how to answer my mom's emails to explain why I haven't been calling home. She wants to know more about me and John and when my little sister Lisa is going to visit me. She expressed concerns to me over winter break saying he had too much control over me, but she doesn't know how college relationships work. I don't want to talk to her about it. I used to want my little sister to visit, but John helped me see that keeping track of a little sister for a weekend would be dumb and wouldn't let us hang out together as much.

The first time he called me a bitch I was really surprised, but I mean we all have bad days. One time we even talked about taking a break in our relationship, but he actually broke down saying over and over how he wouldn't know what to do with himself because of how much we love each other. He went over everything that he has sacrificed for me and what he has done for me. The list was so long that it outweighs when he occasionally loses his temper causing him to insult and curse at me. Plus it's my fault and he is right to call me self-centered because I don't always think about him and I flirt with guys without realizing it. John is such a great boyfriend that I have a hard time finding any of his faults. We need each other. If I really love him, then I will only ask about really big problems. No one wants to fight and I am just not strong enough to avoid crying during an argument.

I know relationships are hard. Not everyone can understand how happy John and I can be. I don't know what my life would be like without him.

Description of the Participants

As explained in detail earlier in the methods chapter, the participants drew from the female population that is part of a small, private liberal arts university located in the mid-Atlantic. The participants were all undergraduate students. This population consisted of a majority of Caucasian. Participants were given pseudonyms to maintain their privacy and to help them feel more comfortable in sharing their dialogue. Four focus groups were conducted with five participants in three of them, and one group consisting of four women. The focus groups were placed together based on the participants' availability for a one hour focus group.

Four follow up interviews were conducted. These interviewees were chosen from the pool of the focus group participants if they brought up a unique point in the focus group or seemed to indicate a strong passion for the subject. One additional interview was given to the woman who missed the focus group, but still expressed interest in taking part of the study.

During all the focus groups and interviews, I took notes on the progression of the dialogue. Follow up questions were asked if there was a lull in the conversation. The focus groups were videotaped and all the interviews were audiotaped. I transcribed the four one hour long focus groups and nine interviews which ranged from 15 minutes to 45 minutes. These transcripts were used as I analyzed the data and coded the themes while also referencing the videotapes and audiotapes for contextual nonverbal communication cues.

Protecting One's Identity

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, participants were encouraged to speak only when they felt comfortable. They were reminded of this protective measure throughout the focus groups and interviews. The hypothetical was provided to begin the dialogue and also to assure participants that they could use it as a reference instead of using one's own experience or

observations. Also, in addition to these instructions, participants engaged in their own protective measures. Particular techniques included talking in the third person, minimizing a past experience and intentionally separating themselves from the scenario. All the participants brought in their own experiences or observations that related to the events that occurred in the hypothetical. The participants were never asked to share these experiences, but the dialogue developed into this personal sharing. The participants chose to share these personal experiences while simultaneously using their protecting their own identity.

Third person.

When describing a similar scenario to the hypothetical, participants often talked of another person who had had a similar experience. The participants described an experience that a friend had gone through. The common line was:

P: I've had a friend...

This description was used by 16 of the 20 participants throughout the focus groups and interviews. The participants would remain vague in describing their "friend." They did not offer a name or any identifying descriptions.

While it is plausible to take this line of a "friend" at face value, it is also became a code for one's own experience. For example, it became clear in one situation that a participant admitted that the "friend" she had been discussing was actually herself.

P4: in all honesty that friend I was talking about that was actually me it was my first relationship on campus when I came in as a freshman and um I wound up like rescheduling my classes as well too by the end of my freshman year and um by sophomore year like if I wasn't traveling with [participant's sport's team] I was like waiting for him in my room or whatever and my roommate used to be

like are you serious like because right now in a lot of ways oh no he'll be here in like 10 minutes or whatever and an hour later I'm still waiting so like but like it took my friends actually being like ok you need to wake up.

This confession occurred approximately 2/3 of the way through the focus group. Despite the increased trust that allowed her to open up once she confessed that she was talking about herself, her manner of speaking changed. She became more withdrawn and decreased her comments. When she did finally speak again, she focused on another friend's experience.

The participants who did not know someone who had directly experienced this exact situation articulated that they could still see the events or various aspects of the events occurring.

P3: we all know someone who has been in a relationship that resembles some of these things and so I feel like you know we can all talk about this because this is a story but if it was happening to us like how would we actually take [it]?

The hypothetical started the discussion, but the participants still related it to their own experiences. The events in the hypothetical were compared to their experiences on campus.

Minimize one's experience.

No participant came out stating their experience was very similar to the hypothetical. Participants could relate their experiences to those in the hypothetical, but they purposely drew a distinction that their relationship was also different from the one described in the hypothetical. If a participant shared that she had been in a similar relationship she emphasized that:

P17: ...it wasn't this bad... (pointing to the paper in front of her)

as compared to the relationship presented in the hypothetical. The participant would reference the scenario in a way such as looking or using some motion towards the hard copy of the hypothetical to distance herself from having that kind of relationship. The relationships the

participants discussed occurred in their past, and yet the participants still intentionally differentiated themselves by minimizing their experiences.

Two participants went to the extent to distinguish their past relationship with the classification of “borderline abusive.” Borderline indicated the relationship skirted the edge of abusiveness, but the relationship was not as abusive as the one described in the hypothetical.

P17: I call mine borderline because it was like you know he made me feel bad about myself a lot of times but I didn’t realize it until I got out of it like and it took me a really long time to get over it too like he had you know he was like oh I love long hair like that was one thing I would go over to his place and if I had my hair in a pony tail he would take my scrunchi or like my pony tail holder or like little things like that was really stupid but like it took like a year to cut I like short hair clearly ... but borderline because I don’t know like it wasn’t this bad.

P17: I was like in a very codependent kind of borderline emotional abusive relationship in high school it wasn’t this bad but like you know he said all my friends were stupid and I had to look a certain way so that he would find me sexy and stuff like that and was like you know my friends were all like [boy’s name] is a jerk like but you know I was kind of blinded by my codependence on him...

Another mechanism for the participant to save face was after admitting to being in an unhealthy relationship, the participant would then reveal further details and justify the lasting effects.

P19: I was in a abusive relationships verbally and emotionally abusive in high school and my last boyfriend was a total mess like a real wreck of a person who the best way for him to show like I guess that he cared about our relationship was

to fight and we would always fight like about everything just to show that we were still in it somehow I guess to show that we were still in it but um so now my response is conditioned to in being in relationships like that that you're I fight my boyfriend is not a fighter he will never...

This participant sparked dialogue when the statement above implied that she was just a “fighter” now and had been “conditioned” to be one. One of the other focus participants responded with how

P17: Yeah I trained myself to be thoughtful I used to be just like “ahh” I’ve had to like constantly think about that so

These participants were learning from each other. The second participant (P17) showed the first participant (P19) how she could consciously change her behavior rather than still being influenced by her past relationship.

Identifying the Victim

While protecting one’s identity, the participants began to deliberately separate themselves from the victim by inferring characteristics about the victim. In the hypothetical, the only distinct characteristic explicitly stated was the victim’s gender as female. In the absence of clear factual statements about the victim, characteristics of victim were inferred particularly about her age and personality traits. These additional inferred descriptions were found in all the focus groups.

Separating oneself from the victim.

Despite the dialogue that quickly developed around this hypothetical, the participants hastily verbally separated themselves from the victim. One participant directly stated her fear in becoming similar to the young woman in the hypothetical.

P3: I would like to think I wouldn't be this girl

The young woman in the hypothetical is being separated from the participants through the emphasis of "this girl." This statement occurred halfway through the focus group after the dialogue had discussed other personal and friends' experiences. The young woman in the hypothetical is seen as a negative role model for the participants to follow. The participants are protecting their identity in how they hope they can avoid possessing these traits as the young woman from the hypothetical.

Age.

In addition to verbally separating oneself from the victim, the participants assigned distinguishing characteristics to the victim. Age was discussed as being associated with learning experience. The assumption was that a younger victim particularly in her first year of college would not know better.

P20: I saw a freshman girl because she's so easily changed what she wanted to hopefully she wasn't like a junior or something and start over but yeah it might be a freshman or younger girl... she's just so easily like agreed to these things which made me think she hadn't been doing it for awhile hadn't been in school for awhile so um she didn't know how difficult you know business school would be or um and it was the first football game of the year I mean it could be any year I guess if she was older she could have potentially met other guys...

P6: I think this would happen easier be easier to happen to a freshman but the age that they're we're at and where our development is its like called a personal fable where we don't think anyone else knows what we are going through...

P20: somebody younger wouldn't have as much experience wouldn't have enough confidence within themselves to like you know take a stand against these kinds of things...

P6: you kind of figure out who you are as you get older in college.

It was accepted in all four focus groups that this victim was of a younger age and that it would be less likely to happen to an older college student. The interesting contrast to this statement occurred when the focus group participants shared stories of friends in which these scenarios were currently happening and the friends were not in their first year. However overall the participants judged the victim to most likely be younger. The assumption that as one got older, the more life experiences would occur.

Personality characteristics.

In addition to agreeing that the young woman in the hypothetical was younger, the young woman's personality was generalized as having weaker personality traits. A consistent characteristic to emerge for the woman in the story was that she possessed low self esteem or lacked confidence. This trait was used as a justification for allowing her boyfriend to control her.

P2: I don't know if it's kind of he was looking for someone who would be more um someone with less confidence and someone would be more dependent and easy to manipulate

P10: It just doesn't sound like kind of like she sounds very insecure so that's why she's keeps coming back to him she is very insecure or very unsure of who she is

P20: I mean just personality wise somebody who's not strong willed I guess

P2: I think a lot of time it could begin with a lack of confidence on the girl's part

P5: one friend she had like absolutely no self confidence and when she finally did get a boyfriend and he wasn't a bad looking boyfriend she was like oh my god

this guy like really attractive he's attracted to me like this is amazing this doesn't happen all the time so she was like really desperate to hang onto the relationship she didn't really know if she would get another boyfriend again because of her lack of self confidence.

This personality trait was specifically discussed by five different participants. A distinguishing point was that the dialogue developed around the woman in the hypothetical already possessing this trait of insecurity before the relationship occurred. This lack of confidence was sought out by the boyfriend illustrating that her low self esteem was visible and easy for the boyfriend to take advantage of.

In addition to the victim being insecure, the victim was also expected to be inexperienced. The victim was described as lacking additional relationship experience beyond this current one.

P2: it's a girl who doesn't really know herself or hadn't been in a relationship and didn't know what to expect...

P1: I saw it more of as not knowing any different if you're in your first serious relationship.

She was apparently naïve that these traits were not normal for a relationship. The assumption in this statement is that if the participant had known healthy relationships, then she would also know how to leave the relationship and to not continue it.

Another common trait assigned to the victim was that the victim somehow liked the abuse and liked being controlled.

P2: I mean it's just seems like both the girl and the guy or in a lot situations like the girl wants someone to take care of her.

P13: I think she also like the idea that someone is taking care of her someone who is the man of the relationship.

P10: It just seems like she's lost um she's lost sight of what she wants to do um which I think is kind of common once you especially when it's a first serious relationship you just lose sight of who you are.

P12: I think the whole wanting control makes a lot of sense like you just need some direction something to hold onto.

P15: she seems to like it and want it in a way that...

P13: (in response to P15) She lets herself be in that situation.

This idea of liking abuse was mentioned by five different participants. These participants conflated caring with controlling as evidenced in their statements, "she wants someone to care for her." Naturally people want to be cared about, but there is a difference between caring and controlling. Just as the victim may have confused the words, the participants also confused this language. This assumption that she liked the relationship was inferred because she remained in the relationship. The outside influences are written off to what might be prompting the victim to stay in the relationship such as her lack of direction which the participants describe and then discount. When the victim lacks focus, it illustrates that she is unaware of what she wants, but it does not necessarily mean she likes what is occurring.

While traits were agreed upon, there was also a fear in how long these traits would continue. These traits were seen as unhealthy and detrimental to the victim's future.

P8: goes way beyond just having or being insecure I mean there's a lot more it's a lot more complex that that especially as you stay with him regardless like for years its just gonna get worse...

P10: you bend over backwards to become that person that you were told you should become.

P7: I think like the comfort like going along with that like having like she says I don't have to worry about like calling my friends and what if they can't or don't have lunch or dinner or something then I'm stuck like on my own but she knows that with like John I will always have someone kind of so you feel almost tricking yourself almost into he is doing so much for me and being there for me.

This fear interestingly illustrates how these traits should not be continued, but as mentioned above victims fall into the pattern of these traits and then it can become a part of their personality.

P10: I've met girls who I think its kind of a personality it's almost like if they don't have this type of relationship they don't know what to do with themselves

Contrast with the abuser.

The interesting contrast was how the abuser was not discussed with specific characteristics. When abuse was discussed, it was discussed directly from the hypothetical. The abuser was not described with a specific age or personality traits compared to the victim being assigned these traits. There was a conspicuous absence of discussion regarding the male even though the hypothetical quotes him and describes his actions. While direct references were made to the victim, the abuser was not directly or indirectly referenced.

Rationalizing the Behavior

When discussing the victim in the hypothetical or from real life, participants discussed how these unhealthy behaviors were rationalized and excused. Participants from all focus groups were easily able to describe the possible excuses and agreed with other participants suggestions.

The dialogue progressed very rapidly as all participants could give examples of the excuses they had been told in the past.

P4: she's like covering up the negatives with what she thinks is the positive.

P3: it seems like she is rationalizing his jealousy like as a normal thing. She is making it normal in her head...

P7: you feel almost tricking yourself almost into he is doing so much for me and being there for me.

P8: they be like no it's [their boyfriend's ideas] for my own good.

P6: I know it's just a hypothetical situation but you feel like all the reasons that she's giving for oh it was my fault and oh this was so stupid and I was so dumb are things that he told her and twisted it around to seem really good like you know or when he calls her like he calls her a bitch oh I just lose my temper because of how much I love you and like mind games making it make sense this is why it's ok.

P14: I don't know if she really is happy you can't really tell what someone else feels but there is just a lot of rationalization going on she just seems to you know logically logify always be angry with so it seems like everything fine or maybe she wants to reassure herself everything is fine.

When describing these excuses one participant noted that:

P1: I wouldn't surround myself with friends like that so is it do people just make exceptions for boyfriends or something

The title and role of a "boyfriend" compared to that of a friend seemed to give the boyfriend a lower set of standards to adhere to allowing for more exceptions in terms of respect.

One particular rationalizing statement emphasized how the relationship could reach a deeper level. These statements do not support the relationship in place, but instead attempt to provide comfort to these unhealthy traits.

P15: it could be worse he's not making her do drugs or physically abusing her.

P19: its not so bad its not this its not like he's hitting me its not like he's that mean everyone fights everyone while he's helping me with all this other stuff so you see the positives rather than the negatives...

The participants began to question if the victim really did not know that these behaviors were unhealthy or if the participant was avoiding the problems. The problem in avoiding accepting these problems is that the victim will be unable to change and instead will remain in this unhealthy relationship.

P12: I think there is a duplicity in her mind of like have to know deep down that that pretty nobody that hits you or swears at you like that is really good for you but something is like causing her but this is how it is and like I don't know what my life would like without him she is afraid to take that chance.

P14: we see things the way we want to see things and it sounds to me like she because she is rationalizing his behavior so much and blaming everything on her she's just not ready to get out like she probably has a sense of something not right but she's just not ready.

P12: I think she is cutting herself off and she is sort of numbing herself to experiencing what she is really feeling and she's not allowing that change to take place.

The victim could also avoid realizing these behaviors because of the outside influences. The role of friends and observations can influence how one reflects on a relationship causing the

victim to second guess any discomfort in the relationship. The relationship cannot be removed from the environment and becomes influenced by those around the victim. In this hypothetical the surrounding environment is encouraging the victim to stay in the relationship and positively build up her boyfriend.

P1: the environment of the campus fed on the girl's blindness to how the guy is because if you have everyone around you saying oh he's like gorgeous he's like the perfect guy and you start to think oh maybe he is like everyone else thinks he's perfect so he has to be even if he does have these few flaws...

Love.

Participants thoroughly discussed the role of the word love in rationalizing the behaviors. Love was seen as a loaded term and even referred to as "the 'L' word" because of the power that was held behind it.

P15: the problem is you know if you're in love and someone tells you look you are always going to offend the person no matter what your mom or friends... when you are love you just see the positive things in the person and you totally don't see the bad things...

P10: I [am] terrified saying I love you just because I've had so many bad experiences saying I love you.

Love was questioned as to if it could be used properly. It was unanimously agreed in the focus groups that the hypothetical did not illustrate love in a relationship. Rather, love was being used as an excuse for the behavior. This idea of having love be misused was further supported in personal and friends' experiences. This excuse was also described as being a common justification.

P9: he's just using love as that like manipulative tool it's like saying like well they don't love you like I do in re like how can you say something like that like how do you know how much another person...

P10: big tool of manipulation in my opinion when taken incorrectly... I mean I've seen and I've been part of relationships love is kind of a tool you know what I mean and it's for one person is using to convince the other person but I have your best interest at heart...

P7: I think he uses um like the word love like to get away with being able to do things like um say he can critique her and yell at her and its ok because he loves her so he kind of use it like as an excuse...

P9: it's just that element of respect too if he was really in love with her why would he say those kind of things if you care about someone why would you cut someone down that much?

P2: I can see how she could I guess wrongly think that this is love because um she thinks she likes trained herself into thinking that he's controlling her classes because like he does have a lot invested in her so it would make sense for her to think oh that's because he loves me.

P4: it is very hard to see it like when it is progressing cuz you get into this thing where you begin thinking like oh he's doing this because he loves me.

This concept of love was further discussed in how strong the victim feels about being in love with her boyfriend. This repetition of being in love as standard to judge the healthiness of the relationship.

P12: I mean it's kind of interesting that the only thing she repeats is I don't know what my life would be like without him and I think its sort of just that security

kind of get the whole relationship thing offers her she has somebody and does give her sort of an identity a lot of security just having somebody you think loves you even though it seems like kind of a perverted love.

P4: how he loves me like um every time she uses love it seems like an excuse for like his behavior instead of like them...

P13: I also feel like the relationship is quite shallow um just on the surface because she says if I really love him then I will only ask about really big problems.

Tipping Point

In the midst of sharing how victims justify these unhealthy behaviors, the question of where the line would be drawn continued to emerge and participants attempted to answer this critical question. This drawing of a line symbolized where the relationship should end. The term “red flag” was used by five participants to describe their view. There was not one clear consensus for when the relationship in the hypothetical should have ended. There was not a debate that any of the “lines drawn” were wrong, but rather the participants shared many different ideas. The points picked were found throughout the hypothetical.

P15: yeah I wouldn't draw the line in like one thing that happens but depending on you know how frequently it does.

P14: if there is a line for anyone I think it would be for a man to call a woman a bitch...I mean if she was willing to take that and rationalize that there is no way you can take that and rationalize a man calling a woman a bitch.

P11: it's before that when um he says she wouldn't amount to anything in life.

P11: ...just bringing her down and her self esteem.

The difficulty in finding one specific moment to draw a line increased because of how these events were viewed as a progression. One participant described this progression as

P3: ... if you know start really slow stick your toe in the water oh well it seems to be good so maybe I'll like keep inching in you wouldn't notice

Participants could not always pick just one point, but they rather jumped throughout the hypothetical or they would just talk generally about the unhealthiness of the relationship.

Reflection on where past relationships went wrong and participants could still not pinpoint just one point, but instead they described a common pattern or repeating behavior characteristic.

P19: you have moments you're like how did that just happen I'm not really sure what just happened

P4: built up to that point where she was like I can't anymore and then like after that like it was even hard for them to be around each other because it was kind of like when she woke up like two seconds and stuff she realized you guys were right I was like it it shouldn't have gotten to that point where like you had to smack him.

Even though the participants could not pick one point for where the relationship went wrong, the term of "that point" continued to be used. However "that point" was considered different from the "breaking point." A "breaking point" was used by three participants describing the extreme extent to where the relationship should have ended.

P8: you get to the point where it's like or I did I will speak for myself I would rather be dead then feel the way I felt.

P19: at the moment that you realize you would be better off without that other person that's when maybe there is something wrong I should get out of the relationship you there's something wrong here and realize it even if you don't admit it to anyone everyone I guess with like any sort of sense has that moment I would probably be better off without this I can defiantly do without this and if you have that thought then that's probably when it's probably heading south.

Warning signs.

When discussing the tipping point, participants also described the progression of abuse that this relationship took.

P4: It seems like he is stripping away her independence

The participants described this progression through what they considered warning signs. In two different focus groups, four participants used the term “brainwash” to refer to how the victim would be unable to see the reality in the relationship. This brainwashing could lead to distancing oneself from people who bring the abuse to your attention such as family and friends. The hypothetical was directly referred to as:

P14: I do think her mom knows something going on because her mom emailing her and wants to know more about the relationship and saying um John has too much control over her so I don't know for somebody who is not physically there to notice that there is a problem that just signifies a lot.

This disapproval of family and friends continued to emerge as a warning sign throughout the focus groups. The participants assumed these opinions would be respected because family and friends are seen as knowing the victim better than the boyfriend. Family and friends are also

viewing the relationship from the outside allowing them a different perspective. However the importance of their approval can decrease as the relationship progresses.

P2: It's a scary situation though because could you get to a point where you no longer see the fact that your family knows you so much better... her family said you have to go abroad I mean this has been your dream um and I don't see why you are listening to him why are you dating this guy he's not like you at all he's controlling you she's like oh well my family is just being stupid.

P5: biggest warning sign was like the friends and family not liking the guy because like they are the people on the outside observing this.

P4: like if my family like if it comes to a point Where I'm like questioning my family or like um thinking stupid without even seeing where they're coming from.

P16: I think maybe when other people start bring it to your attention like that's when you start to think about it once people I think realize.

These warning signs were described similarly among relationships. The participants could relate to one another in their discussion of their warning signs and agreed with other's ideas.

P8: the story is always the same it didn't start out that way but it ended up that way and it always the little things along the way and they could point to like what you are talking about here.

The above statement further supports how this abuse is a progression.

Since the warning signs are seen similarly, participants can learn to recognize the warning signs from a past relationship. One participant described how she was able to use her past unhealthy experience to prevent remaining into a similar relationship.

P4: I think it was the people who were closest closest to me when they started like questioning like well um ok this is a problem and that's like the reason why I got out of the other relationship like almost immediately because I saw the same like warning signs.

When this participant discussed this experience, she explained how she did not see these warning signs before she entered into the relationship. She was able to recognize these unhealthy characteristics after being in the relationship.

Progression to physical violence.

The idea of how this verbal abuse can progress to physical abuse was deeply discussed in a very serious manner. There was a common fear of a relationship like this turning to physical violence. The participants directly referenced the hypothetical in viewing how easily this scenario could progress to physical violence. They inferred this progression to violence because the hypothetical does not mention any physical violence or indication of physical violence happening.

P12: he would stay after that she would probably have to get a restraining order on the guy for god's sake and he's showed up when its not planned I mean he knows where she is constantly the abuse wouldn't stop if the relationship did so I mean I think you are definitely aware of that and I would be scared.

P13: he's challenging her and telling her to like say something back and when she doesn't he keeps on going and going escalating she's like waiting for him to like hit her for her to stand up to him on her own or to stop him.

One participant shared a personal experience to how easily the abuse can turn into physical violence. Her description of the cycle explained the progression of this violence.

P8: I've been there in this exact situation and the next thing that comes after this last part is something like getting spit at or you know something that's not quite violence but it's sort of in that gray area between being called names or being told that you're worthless who actually getting like pushed or shoved or bumped or some little thing like

There was unanimous agreement within the focus groups that physical violence would not be tolerated with the exception of one participant. She was hesitant to take this strong stance and rationalized the physically violent behavior as a mistake that could be excused.

P16: I know that people make their mistakes so there could be that one time your partner gets drunk and you know he might physically like maybe slap you or push you.

This statement was not reflective of the other participants. Although no debate occurred over this statement, the participants within this group did not agree with her nor did they expand on her statement.

Outside Perspective

At the beginning of the discussions, there was an assumption that an outside perspective would be able to recognize the abuse once it had reached a certain point. However this outside perspective became further complicated by the victim feeling misunderstood, the hope that the whole picture was not seen in the relationship and the unclear role that a friend should play.

Once the focus groups progressed, the group discussed the difficulty in being able to recognize the unhealthiness when one is right in the middle of the relationship. All the participants agreed how being in the relationship would cause one to judge the relationship different than on being on the outside.

P16: it's hard to like really say it's abuse especially when like you are in a relationship.

P7: its always so much easy for the person outside to be like oh why would you do that that's stupid don't call him back or something but the person in the midst of it like they never really see it.

P3: I feel like you know we can all talk about this because this is a story but if it was happening to us like how would we actually take...

P19: it's hard um when you look at it from an outside and see how being in a relationship like that you could I don't want to say it like brainwash isn't the right word for it but becomes so involved [mutual agreement from other focus group participants] in the relationship so used to it.

After having this conversation of being on the outside, the participants still discussed the hypothetical as if they were familiar with it. The participants did not always explore the complexity in the relationship and the difficulty in making a change within the relationship.

P2: we aren't saying end the relationship we're saying have a backbone.

This statement does not take into account the mental toll that this relationship has had on the victim. One change in the abuser's attitude will not suddenly make the relationship healthy. This statement was made two thirds of the way through the focus group after the discussion had brought up the role of outside influences.

Victim misunderstood.

As previously mentioned, the person being in the relationship can have a different perception of the relationship. The victim can shield herself from the reality of the situation. Being right inside the situation, the scenario becomes harder to analyze compared to being outside the relationship. The unhealthy aspects of the relationship become justified.

P10: when you're actually in it you convince yourself that you're in love and that you're happy and this is what happy couples look like and especially with the stigma of like in the beginning in being the celebrity couple on campus reputation to live up to...

The mindset of the victim can change to believe that no one on the outside can truly understand their relationship. If a friend approached the victim about the relationship, the victim can see them as misunderstanding the relationship.

P18: I've noticed a lot of people can look at it like the stories of your friends accuse of being jealous.

This idea of friends wanting a relationship that the friend has just confronted as being unhealthy illustrates how the victim's mindset has changed. This accusation also is an excuse the victim will use rather than listening to their friends and accepting the problem.

An interesting contrast emerged with how victims will feel misunderstood. A victim can feel trapped by the outside because no one on the outside can see the problems. The victim can feel like as if this façade should continue since she appears that everything is normal. Victims do not always display and discuss the weaknesses in the relationships. Hiding the unhealthy aspect of the relationship prevents an outsider from realizing that anything is wrong with the relationship, but it also can keep the victim from receiving help.

P8: I'm the kind of person that everything seems fine on the outside nobody understood.

P8: they fit me in these categories but inside I was just so miserable and so unhappy I would always be in this messed up relationship and I would never know how do you know end it...

Missing details.

Being on the outside prevents one from knowing all the details. A common question and doubt was raised to if this hypothetical situation was giving the whole story and if the relationship could be condensed into a story. Although every detail could not be given, few questions were raised during the discussion. The participants emphasized that they did not know everything in the hypothetical, but they did not have specific points that they were missing.

P13: I just don't think a relationship can be explained on a page we know the black and white side of it but we don't know the grey areas it's I think yes it does happen but we don't understand all the parts of it.

P19: this little story seems really extreme because this is allin one paper.

The hypothetical was viewed as being told from the young woman's side because she was the narrator. About a third of the way through a focus group, one participant wanted an alternate point of view.

P13: [I] want to hear it from his side we see him as the controlling person and she as the victim but um I mean I don't think he is a bad guy he just don't know what to do insecure and felt that was the only way that he could hang on to her happen he need help as well not just her

This point of view was especially unique to one individual within a focus group who adamantly defended the man in the scenario. This participant discussed optimistically that the scenario was not as bad as it seemed. The other participants in that focus group and also in other focus groups did not defend the man as much. Rather the participants would discuss men generally in relationships and how women do have the possibility of playing a controlling role in the relationship.

P18: I don't think you have to understand the entire whole [relationship].

P19: how do you know you don't know from the outside you don't know this is what is going on for real?

P16: sometimes you really don't understand like their entire relationship sometimes.

These views provided an interesting contrast because all the participants were given the exact same hypothetical and saw the relationship differently. One example was one focus group interpreting the hypothetical line: "I don't always think about him and I flirt with guys without realizing it." was viewed differently in one focus group. One participant took the flirting literally to mean the woman was taking that action.

P15: And like she's says its my fault and he has a right to call me self centered because I like I flirt with guys without realizing it well when you flirt with guys it's a sign that you're not maybe you like the relationship you are having with the boyfriend but you are not into that person um because if you are really in love with someone you love him for who he is then you don't want to flirt with guys you are with a guy but you know then you go out flirting provocatively.

A differing point of view was brought up doubting her actually flirting with other guys, but her boyfriend imagining it.

P13: when I first read that line I flirt with guys without realizing it I thought she wasn't flirting with guys she was actually talking to them... and he took it as she flirting with them... Kind of like get away from my girl type of thing.

Another participant agreed with this point of view, while another participant took a compromising view.

P12: I think it's probably both of that in some ways.

This compromise illustrates that even if one cannot know the whole story or take the whole story to mean a truth, truths can still emerge from the story.

The question of how much to judge a relationship emerged. A common fear was the extreme of an outside perspective judging the relationship too much.

P1: I hate nothing more when people judge my relationship because you know they don't always know what's going on.

P16: I think I'm less judgmental like having been judged.

While being too judgmental is unhealthy, it is unrealistic to believe that on the outside one could receive all the facts.

P17: That [being involved in all the same activities] would be the only way to see the whole story and even then you are not inside of it it's...

It is unlikely that friends can truly be involved in all the exact same activities.

Friend's role.

This fear of judging was also illustrated when determining what one's role as a friend was. When discussing the hypothetical, participants discussed the experiences of friends and observations of friends being part of unhealthy relationships. The question of what one should do as that friend continued to emerge in all focus groups.

P15: I think that also a problem that as friends you want to help but it is really difficult.

P19: I have to be honest I don't know because I think if you tried to help someone a lot of times it feels like an attack on them as like as much as it's never meant to be that it can feel like well you can't do this yourself because your relationship is so messed up that it's you can't do this we have to help you which can feel like an attack.

P2: I feel like in being a friend a lot of times I second guess myself like oh you know maybe I shouldn't say anything because I don't really know exactly what is going on in the relationship like maybe its better I'm just maybe I'm only seeing like the troubled times.

Although friends can be unsure of what exactly their role is, a clear consensus was found that friends are desperately needed by the victim. One of the concerns in the hypothetical was when the victim in the hypothetical did not have the outlet of friends.

P12: she doesn't know who to turn to especially because she's alienated herself from her friends.

One of the common phrases was "being there" for the friend was used by four participants.

P19: You have to be a friend and you have to be like I'm here if you ever want to talk about anything I'm here do you want to go to the gym, do you want to go running, do you wanna go get a cup coffee do you have time trying to be in their life as much as you can even if it's hard if their partner isn't interested in it or not interested in letting them do it just be there for them because I don't think you can't make someone get out of a relationship that they don't want to get out of and if they feel like this is the best thing for them you almost have to let them be in that...

P6: I think the most important thing to for when you have friends who are in these type of situations is to stick by them because I feel like our tendency is to get basically fed up because you're friend who is in that situations keeps talking to you and telling you all these things and you're like why would you let him talk to you in that way I just love him so much and people eventually get fed up like they

are kind of not listening like I won't give them advice it's sort of isolates them even more because my friends don't want to listen to me anymore but like there's those girls they really they really need people.

P15: the general problem is that you have to or somehow or friends show this person there definitely is a life beyond the other person.

While participants agreed to be there, their frustrations emerged as they explained their annoyances of being there for a friend who would not necessarily appreciate it at the time.

P17: in high school I had a boyfriend who really like um ended up really disconnected from my group because I spent a lot of time in his group and they stopped inviting me to things because I never came anyway...

While discussing the role of a friend, an expectation included being able to confront a friend about the unhealthy relationship. Participants shared the delicate balance needed for this confrontation. This advice should avoid offending a friend and pushing the friend away. The idea of indirectly addressing the problem was strongly agree upon by the participants.

P20: I would try to just give a little bit of advice without like totally bashing them or whatever you know what I'm saying um I would kind of hint towards it I guess before being too aggressive but then if I noticed it continuing or getting worse and like affecting one of my friends then I would be more aggressive about it.

P16: Maybe you can be like "Hmm so he said you are not allowed to go out is that so it that really really ok" like let them know.

Although friends hope they could be there to address the problem, the discussion also acknowledged how a good friend can be completely oblivious to what is going on.

P19: if it was your friend you might not even necessarily understand like what was going on you might not have any idea.

This statement illustrates how verbal abuse is difficult to see in all the relationships and hard to notice even in those around you.

The role of friends was a difficult subject to discuss because no concrete ideas or advice were offered. A lot of the dialogue involved silence with interjections of unsure language such as “I guess” or “I don’t know.”

Key Informant Interviews

Although the participants struggled to give concrete ideas for advice, the key informants were able to give clearer advice to the victims. Key informant interviews were conducted to further enhance the research in studying how campus leaders discuss this issue. These interviews were imperative because this research could not be separated from the administration or be viewed without also considering the student and administration action surrounding domestic violence. The interviewees all worked or attended the university as the other participants allowing them to be familiar with the environment. In these interviews 17 key informant themes emerged (Appendix G), but the most salient theme was how to break the pattern.

These key informants were chosen based on their leadership roles on campus and their involvement with domestic violence. Their insight provided further detail regarding the environment that surrounded campus and gave the administration’s point of view. The key informants included the men’s associate dean who brought the white ribbon campaign to campus, the men’s associate dean who was the previous advisor for the on campus group students against violence, the president of the on campus group student voices against violence

and who brought the red flag campaign to campus and an on campus police lieutenant. These interviews became imperative to supplement the focus groups and one-on-one interviews.

Breaking the Pattern

The advice offered by my key informants was from an administrative perspective as opposed to that of a friend. The role that the key informants play is in reaction to the abuse that the victims suffer. In this study the key informants hold positions that only allow them to react to a situation if it is brought to their attention.

KI#1: she would come here and she would say um for example “I broke up with this individual 2 or 3 months ago and since that time he won’t leave me alone he won’t take no for an answer I’ve ended the relationship and now he keeps texting he keeps um you know instant messaging me and I can’t seem to get rid of him and now I have some concerns” so at that point we would present her with a stalking packet um we standardized packet I think I made it about 5 years ago when I started to see an increase of these and what it does is basically outlines what VA law says about this we let them know that is actually a criminal offense because a lot of time they think they kind of have to put up with it and they don’t understand that technology is certainly a form of abuse just because they aren’t doing it in person does not mean that it is not impactful um so they would get the packet outline the criminal offenses outlines their rights as a crime victim it gives them a log so they can actually document on that log contacts they are being made in case they choose to prosecute that case.

Limitations to responses.

While describing these narratives, the key informants also discussed that they face limitations. The key informants were limited in their positions based on the laws in place and how much is actually reported. The laws are very specific in what can be done which often requires the victim to report the crime and follow through with it. The key informant roles were different from those of the students in that key informants had contact with the students but in less personal ways. The key informants were seen as administrators compared to students viewed as friends. Students were less likely to share details of their relationship with the key informants compared to the focus group participants.

KI#1: we can take hearsay information from witnesses or friends of the victim who might have knowledge from the victim of what is going on but we can not um we cannot we couldn't file a police report based on somebody else's information about what happened to a victim nor we could we attempt to prosecute in a case like that so um the procedure would be if the victim came forward and reported say harassment.

The key informants did notice when specific attention was drawn to unhealthy behaviors in a relationship before they could reach the extent being noticed in public.

KI#3: I've definitely seen unhealthy relationships and it's really hard it's such a hard issue like it's sometimes even harder than assault because it's not a list of clear cut especially when everyone has a different form of communication with each other like parents sometimes yell and that's just how they are so for me.

The key informants emphasized they only could take action in what they have reported to them and have been told. The delays in communication prevent the administration from acting right away.

KI#1: he had assaulted women physically assaulted women and none of them were willing to um give any information to police for fear of being ostracized from social networks on campus so there is a lot of different pressures that influence why people tell us things and why they don't um but we really only hear about it when the student finds it unmanageable.

Advice.

The key informants gave advice on what they believed would be best for students to follow if they were in an unhealthy relationship. When ending a relationship, the emphasis was placed in using specific communication and seeking help afterwards.

KI#1: a lot of time victims are well 2 things when they are ending a relationship um they want to be nice and I understand that they want to be nice but they do need to be communicative that they don't want to have any further contact with the individual so saying you know being nice and saying its over and the contact continues and continues and you think oh I'll just be nice and tolerate it well you shouldn't um you should set a clear boundary.

KI#1: that victims don't seek help for what is going and they enter into relationships that are very similar to the ones so they just got out of so you are taking your problems from one relationship and finding a new person and dumping those problems in this new relationship.

KI#3: I think that a lot of women just need to realize they don't have to have a reason to break up with someone they just can for no reason at all just see ya later I don't want to see you again or talk to you anymore so I guess its really hard but you just have to realize it comes in all different forms and just get out while you can.

KI#3: I think that a lot of people are uneducated about it I think that a lot of women don't understand when they're assaulted they don't understand who to contact when its ok to contact someone they don't understand that its always ok to contact someone even if you don't think it's a big deal.

Advice was also offered in one's behavior when one was not directly involved in an abusive situation. The surrounding community outside the relationship also needs to be playing an active role in stopping verbal abuse. An example was what to do when hearing other's behaviors surrounding us.

KI#2: don't um continue the cycle so if somebody said something and you are not comfortable confronting them don't laugh.

KI#2: you need to put the message where the behavior is um I don't know if that happens you would know more because you are in those environments and maybe you hoping it happens sometimes um but maybe not maybe it is more women confronting men...and then you are just a bitch because the man does it.

The previous statement was in regards to men becoming more comfortable in confronting other men. Women were described as being comfortable in the confrontation of one another.

The disconnect between key informants and students.

A main problem that arises is when the administration is unaware of what is going on, and then the administration cannot help the student. This problem increases when students are expecting the administration to create changes in the student body.

KI#2: really the men and students are the only one who can change I mean what can we do as administrators because we are not aware that the behavior is happening somebody come in here very rarely does someone come in here and say though...

KI#1: in this environment the reason we pay so much closer attention is that the contact is very very frequent and over short duration of time which in an assessment perspective violence tells me that there is a very quick period of escalation that can occur so we have to be mindful of exactly what kind of threats are being made and we have to move on those quickly because we don't have as much time to play around with those other age groups in other populations which is something more specific to um college populations.

The advice that the administration gave clearly supported the positions that they held in the university. Their connection with the victim was different than that of the focus group participants. They can view the victim as a student changing the kind of advice they would give. The advice given to friends about the victim was fairly limited and did not focus as much in the handling the emotional effects from the victim. Their advice focused more on the policy and safety perspective of the student.

Conclusion

These salient themes that emerged provided insight on the different issues and perspectives surrounding the dialogue about verbal abuse. The participants' themes gave a personal perspective in how they protected their identity in the discussion, and when they tried to pinpoint the tipping point. They participants also shared their outside perspective in discussion their observations of friends' relationships. They shared possible rationalizations for the behavior and attributed weak characteristics to the victim. These themes were enhanced by the key informants' advice. However their advice focused more on the administrative role and was not completely applicable to how a friend could help the victim. These various themes illustrate the conflicting influences the victim of the relationship experiences, the justifications of these

CHAPTER 5

Discussion

My initial goal in studying verbal abuse was to see how it was discussed. While many more themes emerged, I focused on the themes salient to my primary focus on narratives. Verbal abuse was not a new topic to all of the participants, but the environment of the focus groups and interviews provided room for dialogue to the participants. While the hypothetical was used in depth by several participants, other participants opened up about their own personal and friends' experiences. This dialogue about verbal abuse is difficult to start when there is such a strong culture of perfection as was found at this university. The idea of admitting one's weakness is not encouraged when one is trying to appear to have one's life in control. Being a victim of verbal abuse could be interpreted as being a weakness and an imperfection.

I originally entered into the Rhetoric and Communication Studies major because of my passion for communication studies. I had always enjoyed public speaking but I also enjoyed learning how people communicate and why. I became fascinated with studying all different kind of relationships. I found it fascinating to learn what characteristics we would employ in our interactions. This original passion grew in my past four years encouraging me to explore these theories outside the classroom and in the relationships surrounding me.

I wanted to do a thesis to explore verbal abuse more in depth. When I first started the thesis, I really was unfamiliar with the literature. I had difficulty studying verbal abuse separate from physical abuse. Most research found these two areas of abuse to be combined with verbal abuse being labeled as a precursor to physical abuse (Infante, Riddle, Horvath & Tumlin, 1992, p.118, Marshall, 1996, p.380, Stets & Henderson, 1991, p. 35). Research did not focus solely on verbal abuse and did not distinctly describe how verbal abuse was a form of abuse on its own.

Furthermore, a majority of research was found regarding cohabitating or married couples. Little research had been conducted specifically on college students. I specifically wanted to study college students because college is an environment where students explore their identity and this exploration usually takes place prior to marriage. When I began my research, I was surprised that this area of study was relatively limited in past research. My surprise arose because I saw this issue as being prevalent in our society, but the area of verbal abuse lacked research.

With a focus on narrative, I chose to utilize focus groups and interviews as my primary research methods. Both methods allow for exploration of narrative structure and emergent themes. As I analyzed the interview and focus group transcripts it became clear that the participants' dialogue revealed even more about their individual experience than if they had shared the details of their own specific abuse. I studied their own words to see how verbal abuse was being discussed. The way people talked about certain experiences raised questions for me as to if they had completely gotten over their own experiences with abuse or if the abuse could ever be completely gotten through. Some participants got a distant look in their eyes or their phrasing was unusual.

I chose to focus on women because I wanted to hear how women spoke on this topic and also to capitalize on my own credibility. My interest primarily began based on my own experience and wanting to explore it further. I wanted to know what happened when women talked about their own experience that led to other women justifying abuse. Additionally I believed that men would have a hard time express their true thoughts to a woman. Although I do realize that speaking to men would have brought up women's experiences, I was more interested in the ways that women talked amongst each other. Also given the climate of perfection, there were issues that are primarily focused on how women talk amongst women about other women.

I was also limited by time motivating to choose not to attempt the long term work of research-participant trust building central to such a project. I really liked being able to conduct this study on a smaller campus because people were able to really connect over certain events.

I was unsure how the focus groups would play out or if students would have any feelings on the subject. I was very curious to how everyone would discuss the issues since this is such an emotionally laden topic. I was surprised when students offered their personal experiences or those of friends illustrating that this topic is a popular issue on campus. The discussion was fairly consistent with the research found in regards to the cycle of abuse. I also saw a similar pattern from the personal verbal abuse I had endured.

One of the first themes to emerge was how everyone protected themselves in this topic. I offered the participants a way to participate without exposing their own private stories. A fascinating theme to emerge was the additional methods the participants employed themselves to protect their identity. Everyone used a similar mechanism to save their own face. I was surprised with how open people were making me think perhaps this term has been considered too much of a loaded term. Prior to this study, I would have felt uncomfortable bringing up to this topic. Protection is offered when someone is scared of a possible threat. Participants could have been scared about being recognized later or even more immediate the focus group knowing what they actually went through. These protections could have emerged for participants to protect themselves to avoid admitting abuse. These protections allowed participants the flexibility to take on another façade or to even begin working out their abuse themselves. I also examined how the topics surfaced and their influenced on the dialogue.

An interesting aspect to this theme was how it emerged when I was sharing my research with others and initially writing my thesis. I unconsciously employed similar mechanisms in

which I attempted to minimize my research in not sharing as many details or using less bold terms in descriptions. This aspect was interesting considering I had just explored the theme concerning the mechanisms that participants had protected themselves with.

Protecting further protected themselves by describing the victim as a weak woman. Even with the participants having so many similar experiences to draw from, the participants still tried to distance themselves from this victim. This idea of talking about a hypothetical and still wanting to not be confused with the victim illustrates just how distant the victim is viewed in society. Participants could talk about the victim, but did not want to openly identify with the victim. The reasoning behind not wanting to expand this victim status is in the characteristics that the participants were drawing from. They assumed the victim was young age contradicting the pattern discovered in research. As mentioned in the review of literature chapter, a study conducted on high school and college age students found that the partner violence increased with age and occurs more later in life (Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin & Kupper, 2001, p.1679, 1684). The victim was also attributed weak characteristics like low self esteem and lacking direction in life. These characteristics furthered the disconnect between the participants and the victim. This weakness of the victim was interesting for me because I never considered myself to be a weak woman and when reflecting on women that the participants knew, one distinction was made:

P4: she's a very like amongst her girlfriends she is very feisty and aggressive.

This distinction in attitude illustrates that the victims are not as helpless as they were stereotyped as being. These characteristics of weaknesses were assigned to further assure separation between the hypothetical and the participants. Weak characteristics were assigned to the victim rather than emphasizing the change in psychological mindset of the victim (Marshall,

1996, 380). If the victim is extremely weak and the participants view themselves higher, then the chance of them identifying will decrease.

While much focus was given to the victim, little focus was on the abuser or trying to give a rationale as to why the man would be so harsh to the young woman in the scenario. Focus was not placed as much on the abuser. One participant in a focus group stood out to me based on her interpretation of consistently trying to see the guy in a positive light.

P13: I think she's just as bad as he is I want to hear it from his side we see him as the controlling person and she as the victim but um I mean I don't think he is a bad guy he just don't know what to do insecure and felt that was the only way that he could hang on to her happen he need help as well not just her.

This participant supported the idea of the lack of awareness the abuser has in his actions. She was fighting that maybe he did not know what he was doing was wrong (Yelsma, 1995, p. 103). This same participant spoke of the young woman in a negative light often blaming her for being in that relationship or questioning if the events actually occurred.

P13: She lets herself be in that situation.

P13: I think she also like the idea that someone is taking care of her someone who is the man of the relationship.

P13: But does he really say that you're stupid and you shouldn't do that or does he say maybe like think about it are you really going to find a job? Are you really a social worker are you really going to make any money it just depends on how he says it.

This contrast of opinion was interesting because this participant read the same hypothetical and interpreted it completely differently. No other participant felt as strongly in defending the man in the hypothetical relationship.

My research emphasized that a reciprocal pattern tends to develop in which both partners will begin using verbal abuse in their interactions (Byers, Shue, & Marshall, 2004, p.45, Infante, Riddle, Horvath & Tumlin, 1992, p.118, Yelsma, 1995, p.102). However in the dialogue that developed in the focus groups and interviews, this reciprocity was not mentioned. Rather the abuser and victim were emphasized as completely separate. No direct experiences were discussed in which one person changed the other person.

Instead, an emphasis on the developed pattern of behavior emerged. One participant opened about how she had endured a past abusive relationship and had been able to move forward.

P8: how did I go from being in a really sick relationship getting past that and not getting into one once again and I can't say it was a then fill in the blank it a if takes years if that is the pattern you have set up for yourself.

Her emphasis relied on time and consciously being able to move forward. One of the key informants strongly emphasized the need to get help in order to break the pattern of abuse:

KI#1: that victims don't seek help for what is going and they enter into relationships that are very similar to the ones so they just got out of so you are taking your problems from one relationship and finding a new person and dumping those problems in this new relationship

When discussing the hypothetical, just as differing opinions arose different perspectives were used to interpret the situations. When protecting one's identity the participants would use a

more personal perspective relating to the dialogue through friends or personal experiences. However the participants interchanged with an outside perspective. An outside perspective reflects on the situation in a third person, becomes more distant and is less personalized. This outside perspective is distinct in that participants could distance themselves from the situation and remove their feelings that they might have in the relationship. I expected this theme to play a larger role, but the participants chose to interpret the scenario with a more personal tone.

After identifying with the victim, an outside perspective was often taken in discussing what the victim should do or could have done. Advice was given freely by the participants regardless if they had been in a similar situation before. The outside perspective utilized a more macro level view, but it also distanced the participants in what they were saying. When talking about ending a relationship, one participant talked about how the relationship didn't have to end, just certain characteristics needed to change.

P2: we aren't saying end the relationship we're saying have a backbone.

The idea that just standing up to the abuse will make it go away does not take into account the complexities of verbal abuse. This comment was made in the last ten minutes of the focus group after the group had discussed all the outside influences and difficulty found in these abusive relationships. In the focus group, the participants discussed how there were multiple behaviors and actions that were unhealthy in the relationship. No focus group solely looked at just one problem. Yet this participant saw solving one problem as enough to being able to maintain the relationship.

The role of family was discussed as a large influence in what one learns about being in a relationship. I found this aspect interesting since family is not an extremely large focus in the college age group. Family does play a role in how one was raised, but in this undergraduate

environment majority of students are removed from family environment for extended periods of times allowing the role of family to decrease.

This outside perspective became immersed with the personal perspective when the participants attempted to find the tipping point in the relationship. The tipping point is where the participants drew their line of ending the relationship. The tipping point remained unclear and represents the difficulty in defining verbal abuse. Verbal abuse is an established pattern not just one incident. Regardless of this characteristic, participants all tried to pinpoint the one place where the relationship went wrong when in reality there were several instances that went wrong. One participant vividly stood out to me in how firm she was against profanity being used at anytime with no exceptions.

P14: if there is a line for anyone I think it would be for a man to call a woman a bitch.

Other participants seemed less steadfast with one participant debating when forgiveness should be allowed and if alcohol should be an excuse. The tipping point came up naturally and was often used as a way to place the blame in the relationship. The abuse had already occurred so really determining where the abuse should stop would not help the victim. I think finding one clear point is not necessary when looking at verbal abuse. This abuse should be looked at everything that makes it up to clearly see that it is unacceptable. As the discussion focused on the tipping point, the main thrust of the abuse was lost. When trying to find the one point, the participants lost focus on how the victim should remove herself from the abusive relationship.

The idea of how to get out of relationships was also an unclear concept for the participants. Advice was sparse in the best way to get out with the exception of having assertive friends forcing one to move on. The participants continued to mention their desire for more awareness on this topic in the hopes that students would be aware that this behavior is

unacceptable. If verbal abuse is unknown, then it is harder for it to be recognized and for its characteristics to be noticed (Infante, Riddle, Horvath & Tumlin, 1992, p.124). These awareness events were expected to be established by the administration.

Through my key informant interviews, I found that the administration and students had a disconnect in terms of establishing awareness. The administrators' main role was to take a more reactive role to students. The administration was limited until the students themselves reported the abuse. While the students focused on the education aspect which the administration is working to provide, the students did not mention reporting the abuse to the administration to make them aware of it. The college is limited in what they can actually do without the students fully supporting the initiative, but I also don't think verbal abuse receives priority as is needed today. This topic is extremely current and it is happening throughout college campuses. The events that do occur on campus put on focus largely on domestic violence. Physical violence is easily connected with domestic violence, but I would not consider verbal abuse to be as easily associated with it. Verbal abuse needs to be looked at separately to help the students learn that what is said can be just as damaging as an actual physical force.

Reflecting on my college experience, there has been a lack of informal dialogue that really promotes the conversation among students without a set goal in mind and without having it turn into a lecture. The small number of participants in the focus groups allowed the participants to all participate when they felt comfortable. It was time consuming, but I felt it gave students a chance to speak to how they really felt about their experiences. The focus groups were able to have at least one participant who had a close experience with verbal abuse.

To increase this awareness, more focused dialogue needs to take place. This whole concept of dialogue was an extremely healthy outlet for participants. It came up several times

about how they enjoyed being able to talk and wished there were more opportunities. After the focus group ended, one participant remarked

P: I really liked being able to talk about this and I wish I could do this more.

When I established the focus groups and interviews, I hoped that dialogue would emerge. However, I did not know how it would take place. The hypothetical allowed the participants to start off the conversation. The conversation progressed into personal experience and then ultimately led to a large variety of issues being dismissed.

Participatory Action Research

While conducting this research, I also had the goal of creating a participatory action research component. This idea of a participatory action research component was brought to my attention by my advisor after I revealed my desire to share my research. Research should be extended into the community which allows the findings to be further enhanced (Bhatt, 2008, p. 159-160). My participatory action research component will consist of a workshop to be conducted with the university's administration. I will share my findings from my research specifically the salient themes and open it up to any other questions regarding my research. I will specifically work to decrease the disconnect found between the administration and the students. These findings will ideally help further understanding about verbal abuse.

Limitations in Study

My study purposely focused on women. I was primarily interested in women because of my own personal experience. I feel that a study focusing on the male perspective is also necessary.

I realize that my study will best be used as a model for a private residential liberal arts undergraduate university. Although my study had the majority of Caucasian participants, I

believe my study can be used a model for campuses with different diversities. I do not advocate that the findings will be similar, but I do believe that this method can be used as a model for future studies with a different diversity makeup. Another possible limitation was not an additional follow up interview later on in the semester. This second interview could have measured the lasting effects and if any issues still remained on their mind. I felt my research exceeded my goal in exploring how we discuss verbal abuse.

Future Directions

As mentioned above, I would like to see a study conducted with men because this subject verbal abuse affects both genders. Since the majority of abusers are stereotyped as men (Duck & Wood, 1995, p. 170), this study could focus on addressing the problem from that angle as well.

I also would like to see this study to continue exploring the relationship with the administration and students to see how both of these levels talk about verbal abuse. As my research illustrated, the administration and students cannot be separated as groups when working to bring awareness to this subject.

The focus groups could be continued throughout the year. A specific focus group could study entering first years. This specificity would explore this concept continued to be brought up since the focus group discussed how abuse was more likely to occur to a first year. A longitudinal study could see the progression in how outside influences change the participant's point of view to see if they learn from mistakes or if they learn to rationalize these behaviors.

I feel this subject of verbal abuse could be studied in so many different ways and needs to be studied from all angles. Verbal abuse is a problem within our society and is affecting so many. This journey is just beginning with this subject.

Conclusion

Although more salient themes continued to emerge, my main focus was on how participants discussed verbal abuse. This study did not emerge with a clear pattern of what students should expect nor did it give step by step directions in recognizing the abuse; those goals were not expected to be met. Rather, I was able to explore the narratives that participants used to describe this subject. The dialogue that emerged gave a clear perspective to how the participants feel and have been influenced by verbal abuse. I feel my study was successful because it started the dialogue among the 20 participants and four key informants. The statements that emerged gave firsthand insight into this subject.

This dialogue offered me further reflection on my past experience. I identified particularly in the discussion of the rationalization of behavior and protecting one's identity. I can clearly pinpoint exact instances that I said or performed the actions that the participant described. The participants' description of the victim was the stereotypical definition. However, as I explored verbal abuse, I found the victim could be anyone and was not limited to a "weak" person. The different opinions of when the relationship should have ended illustrate how verbal abuse is misconstrued as one instance. Verbal abuse is a pattern that is developed. As the dialogue progressed and advice continued to be lacked, my desire to have the participatory action research component increased. This research confirmed my belief that the unhealthy relationship I had been was a verbally abusive relationship and that other college students have gone through and are going through similar experiences.

References

- Abuse. (1989). In *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press. Retrieved December 12, 2008, from http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50000960?query_type=word&queryword=abuse&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&result_place=1&search_id=xdag-XGfu38-5300&hilite=50000960
- Anastaplo, G. (1999). *Campus Hate-Speech Codes, Natural Right, and Twentieth-Century Atrocities* (Vol. 44). Symposium Series. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press.
- Bhatt, A. P. (2008, May). The Sita Syndrome: Examining the Communicative Aspects of Domestic Violence from a South Asian Perspective. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 9(3), 155-173.
- Burleson, B. R. (1996). Editor's Introduction. *Communication Yearbook*, 19, x-xix.
- Butler, J. (1997). *Excitable Speech*. New York: Routledge.
- Byers, L. A., Shue, C. K., & Marshall, L. L. (2004, Summer). The Interplay of Violence, Relationship Quality, Commitment, and Communication in Abusive Relationships. *Texas Speech Communication Journal*, 29(1), 43-51.
- Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire* (1942)
- Corry v. Stanford* (1995)
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2004). *Understanding Words That Wound*. United States of America: Westview Press.
- DiQuinzio, P., & Young, I. M. (1997). *Feminist ethics and social policy*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Duck, S., & Wood, J. T. (1995). *Confronting Relationship Challenges*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

- Epstein, D. (1999). Effective Intervention in Domestic Violence Cases: Rethinking the Roles of Prosecutors, Judges, and the Court System. *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism*, 11(3). Retrieved from FOCUS database.
- Epstein, L. & Walker, T. G. (2007). United States v. Morrison. In *Constitutional Law for a Changing America Institutional Powers and Constraints* (6th ed., pp. 471-476). Washington, D.C.: CQ Press.
- Esteban, E. J. (2006, Spring). Parental Verbal Abuse: Culture-Specific Coping Behavior of College Students in the Philippines. *Child Psychiatry and Human Development*, 36(3), 243-259.
- Follingstad, D. R., Wright, S., Lloyd, S., & Sebastian, J. A. (1991, January). Sex Differences in Motivations and Effects in Dating Violence. *Family Relations*, 40(1), 51-57.
- Geiger, B., & Fischer, M. (2006, March). Will Words Ever Harm Me?: Escalation From Verbal to Physical Abuse in Sixth-Grade Classrooms. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 21(3), 337-357.
- Get Educated. (n.d.). *The National Domestic Violence Hotline*. Retrieved September 30, 2008, from http://www.ndvh.org/educate/what_is_dv.html
- Halpern, C. T., Oslak, S. G., Young, M. L., Martin, S. L., & Kupper, L. L. (2001, October). Partner violence among adolescents in opposite-sex romantic relationships: From the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. *American Journal of Public Health*, 91(10), 1679-1685.
- Infante, D. A., & Rancer, A. S. (1996). Argumentativeness and Verbal Aggressiveness: A Review of Recent Theory and Research. *Communication Yearbook*, 19, 319-351.

- Infante, D. A., Riddle, B. L., Horvath, C. L., & Tumlin, S. A. (1992, Spring). Verbal Aggressiveness: Messages and Reasons. *Communication Quarterly*, 40(2), 116-126.
- Jarecke, G. W., & Plant, N. K. (2003). *Seeking Civility Common Courtesy and the Common Law*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Klein, C. F., & Orloff, L. E. (1993, Summer). Symposium on Domestic Violence: Article: Providing Legal Protection For Battered Women: An Analysis of State Statutes and Case Law. *Hofstra Law Review*, 21, 801-1189.
- Kramarae, C. (1996). Classified Information: Race, Class, and (Always) Gender. In J. T. Wood (Ed.), *Gendered Relationships* (pp. 20-38). Mountain View: Mayfield Publishing Company.
- Lane, K. E., & Gwartney-Gibbs, P. A. (1985, March). Violence in the Context of Dating and Sex. *Journal of Family Issues*, 6(1), 45-59.
- Langer, J. (2001). *Mirrored window : focus groups from a moderator's point of view*. Ithaca, NY: PMP.
- Mannheimer, M. J. (1993, October). The Fighting Words Doctrine. *Columbia Law Review*, 93(6), 1527-1571. Retrieved November 29, 2008, from JSTOR database:
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1123082>
- Marshall, L. L. (1996, December). Psychological Abuse of Women: Six Distinct Clusters. *Journal of Family Violence*, 11(4), 379-409.
- McKinney, K. (1986). Measures of Verbal, Physical and Sexual Dating Violence By Gender. *Free Inquiry in Creative Sociology*, 14, 55-60.

- Mertus, J., & Rawls, K. (2008). Crossing the Line: Insights from Foucault on the United States and Torture. In J. Leatherman (Ed.), *Discipline and Punishment in Global Politics* (pp.27-40). United States of America: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Owens, L. O., Shute, R., & Slee, P. (2000). "Guess what I just heard..." Indirect aggression amongst teenage girls in Australia. *Aggressive Behavior*, 26, 67–83.
- Phillips, D. A. (2007, February). Punking and Bullying: Strategies in Middle School, High School, and Beyond. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 22(2), 158-178.
- Punishment for using abusive language to another., VA art. 3, § 18.2-416 (1950).
- recognizable. (2008). *www.dictionary.com*. Retrieved December 8, 2008, from Dictionary.com
Web site: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/recognizable>
- recognized. (2008). *www.dictionary.com*. Retrieved December 8, 2008, from Dictionary.com
Web site: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/recognized>
- Roberts, T. A., Auinger, P., & Klein, J. D. (2006, February). Predictors of Partner Abuse in a Nationally Representative Sample of Adolescents Involved in Heterosexual Dating Relationships. *Violence and Victims*, 21(1), 81-89.
- Saunders, R. M. (1999, December). Fighting Back: 10 Ways to End Verbal Abuse. *Harvard Management Communication Letter*, 7-8.
- Sawicki, J. (1991). Foucault and Feminism: Toward a Politics of Difference. In *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power, and the Body* (pp. 17-32). New York: Routledge.
- Shanley, M. L., & Narayan, U. (1997). *Reconstructing political theory : feminist perspectives* . University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

- Shook, N. J., Gerrity, D. A., Jurich, J., & Segrist, A. E. (2000). Courtship Violence Among College Students: A Comparison of Verbally and Physically Abusive Couples. *Journal of Family Violence, 15*(1), 1-22.
- Stets, J. E., & Henderson, D. A. (1991, January). Contextual Factors Surrounding Conflict Resolution While Dating: Results from a National Study. *Family Relations, 40*(1), 29-36.
- United States v. Morrison* (2001)
- Verbal. (1989). In *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press. Retrieved December 12, 2008, from <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50276196>
- Walker, S. (1994). *Hate Speech*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Weger, H., Jr. (2006, Summer). Associations Among Romantic Attachment, Argumentativeness, and Verbal Aggressiveness In Romantic Relationships. *Argumentation and Advocacy, 43*, 29-40.
- Westlund, A. C. (1999, Summer). Pre-Modern and Modern Power: Foucault and the Case of Domestic Violence. *Signs, 24*(4), 1045-1066. Retrieved from JSTOR database: <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0097-9740%28199922%2924%3A4%3C1045%3APAMPFA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-U>
- White, J. W., & Bondurant, B. (1996). Gendered Violence in Intimate Relationships. In J. T. Wood (Ed.), *Gendered Relationships* (pp. 197-210). Mountain View: Mayfield Publishing Company.
- Winstead, B. A., Derlega, V. J., & Rose, S. (1997). *Gender and Close Relationships* (C. Hendrick & S. S. Hendrick, Eds.). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Wood, J. T. (1996). Gender, Relationships, and Communication. In J. T. Wood (Ed.), *Gendered Relationships* (pp. 3-19). Mountain View: Mayfield Publishing Company.

Wood, J. T. (2001). *Gendered Lives Communication, Gender, and Culture* (4th ed.). Australia: Wadsworth.

Yelsma, P. (1995, Winter). Couples' Affective Orientations and their Verbal Abusiveness. *Communication Quarterly*, 43(1), 100-114.

Appendix A: Email

Subject: Interested in talking about relationships?

Dear Westhampton College Students,

As part of my Rhetoric and Communication Studies honors thesis, I invite you to participate in a focus group discussing how we as women talk about difficult relationships, specially how partners to talk to each other. Discussion may include difficult relationship patterns and abuses.

The first 20 women to respond by emailing Christina.moore@richmond.edu will be able to participate in this opportunity.

I would greatly appreciate your participation. Your name would go into a drawing for five \$20 gift certificates to Starbucks, Salon del Sol, or Ukrop's.

Thank you!
Christina Moore

Appendix B: Informed Consent

Communicative Violence in Romantic Relationships Focus Groups

Project Description

For my honors thesis in RHCS, I am studying the ways in which women talk about difficult relationships specifically about how partners talk to each other. Ultimately I am interested in understanding what constitutes verbal abuse and our social narratives about verbal abuse. Your participation in this project involves participating as a member of this focus group and/or interview. Each focus group should last approximately 90 minutes. During this session, you will be asked to answer questions about relationships based on a hypothetical scenario presented to you.

Principal Investigator

The principal investigator is Christina Moore, honors candidate in the department of Rhetoric and Communication studies. I am being supervised by Dr. Archana Bhatt. Should you have any questions or concerns contact me at Christina.moore@richmond.edu or my advisor Dr. Bhatt at abhett@richmond.edu or 804-287-6520.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this project is voluntary and you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation in the project at any time without penalty.

Confidentiality of Records

All focus groups will be videotaped. Only my advisor and I will have access to these tapes which will be stored in lock facilities during the project. Upon completion of the project all tapes and transcriptions will be destroyed. I assure your confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms and composite narratives in the write up of my study.

Participant's Rights Information

If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research participant, you may contact Dr. Kirk Jonas, the Chair of the University of Richmond's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Participants at 804-484-1565 for information or assistance.

Participant's Consent

The study has been described to me and I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation in the project at any time without penalty. I also understand that I am encouraged to and have access to the health center, the university chaplaincy, calling the University counseling center, CAPS, at 804-289-8119, and an off campus resource, YWCA at 804-643-0888 if I experience any discomfort or distress in relation to this study.

I also understand that the results of the study will be treated in strict confidence and reported with the use of pseudonyms and composite narratives.

Benefits and Risks

This hypothetical situation could evoke memories or might make me reconsider the safety of my friends and/or relationships. These are the two primary risks in that bringing up memories of my own experience or other important people in my life and may also cause me to question the safety in a current relationship or reevaluate the safety of previous relationships. These risks are mediated by I will be provided with ample access to services (CAPS, Chaplaincy, Health Center, YWCA). Additional information will be given to me that I can use for myself or pass along to a friend.

Focus groups do not provide subjects with guaranteed confidentiality. Consequently, there is the possibility that a member of the group may discuss a subject's experience with communicative violence outside of the group. Please exercise care in disclosing highly personal information about yourself or others.

I understand that if I have any questions or concerns about this experiment, I may pose them to Christina Moore at Christina.moore@richmond.edu and Dr. Bhatt at abhatter@richmond.edu or 804-287-6520.

I have read and understand the above information. I understand that this study is limited to persons 18 years of age or older and by participating in the focus group/interview, I attest that I am 18 years of age or older. I consent to participate in this study by signing below.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____

Communicative Violence in Romantic Relationships Interview

Project Description

For my honors thesis in RHCS, I am studying the ways in which women talk about difficult relationships specifically about how partners talk to each other. Ultimately I am interested in understanding what constitutes verbal abuse and our social narratives about verbal abuse. Your participation in this project involves participating as a member of this focus group and/or interview. Each interview will last approximately 60 minutes. During this session, you will be asked to answer questions about relationships based on a hypothetical scenario presented to you.

Principal Investigator

The principal investigator is Christina Moore, honors candidate in the department of Rhetoric and Communication studies. I am being supervised by Dr. Archana Bhatt. Should you have any questions or concerns contact me at Christina.moore@richmond.edu or my advisor Dr. Bhatt at abhatt@richmond.edu or 804-287-6520.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this project is voluntary and you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation in the project at any time without penalty.

Confidentiality of Records

All interviews will be audio taped. Only my advisor and I will have access to these tapes which will be stored in lock facilities during the project. Upon completion of the project all tapes and transcriptions will be destroyed. I assure your confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms and composite narratives in the write up of my study.

Participant's Rights Information

If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research participant, you may contact Dr. Kirk Jonas, the Chair of the University of Richmond's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Participants at 484-1565 for information or assistance.

Participant's Consent

The study has been described to me and I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation in the project at any time without penalty. I also understand that I am encouraged to and have access to the health center, the university chaplaincy, calling the University counseling center, CAPS, at 289-8119, and an off campus resource, YWCA at 804-643-0888 if I experience any discomfort or distress in relation to this study.

I also understand that the results of the study will be treated in strict confidence and reported with the use of pseudonyms and composite narratives.

Benefits and Risks

This hypothetical situation could evoke memories or might make me reconsider the safety of my friends and/or relationships. These are the two primary risks in that bringing up memories of my

own experience or other important people in my life and may also cause me to question the safety in a current relationship or reevaluate the safety of previous relationships. These risks are mediated by I will be provided with ample access to services (CAPS, Chaplaincy, Health Center, YWCA). Additional information will be given to me that I can use for myself or pass along to a friend.

I understand that if I have any questions or concerns about this experiment, I may pose them to Christina Moore at Christina.moore@richmond.edu and Dr. Bhatt at abhett@richmond.edu or 804-287-6520.

I have read and understand the above information. I understand that this study is limited to persons 18 years of age or older and by participating in the focus group/interview, I attest that I am 18 years of age or older. I consent to participate in this study by signing below.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____

Appendix C: Hypothetical

I met John at the first football game of the year and we are now getting ready to go on spring break. Once we started hanging out, all my hall mates couldn't tell me enough nice things about him. Not only was he cute, but he is also known for being one of the nicest guys on campus. I feel like we are the celebrity couple on campus. To make it even better for every possible anniversary, he gives me the most thoughtful presents. Plus, John has already promised me next Christmas we can go skiing at his family's condo.

We have had our ups and downs as all couples do on campus, but John is so special. I don't know what I would do without him. He helped me figure out what I wanted to do in life. At first I was hurt when he told me my dream of being a social worker was stupid and that I wouldn't amount to anything, but now I realize that the business world is better in today's economy. We finally figured out my schedule so that we take morning classes together and study together in the afternoon and night. Before he called me lazy because I preferred to take afternoon classes and sleep in. With such similar schedules, it is so much fun having all my meals with him. I don't have to anxiously call my friends to avoid eating alone.

Each week I go to chapter, my sorority sisters keep complaining how they don't see me anymore. I don't go out as much on the weekend. I just don't have as much energy. I'm lucky I already have the boyfriend while my friends are still looking for theirs. When I go out with the girls, John complains that I am dressing too slutty telling me my short skirts and tight shirts make me look like a prostitute and a whore rather than his girlfriend. I don't mind changing my wardrobe around. The fights just aren't worth it and it's just easier for me to hang out with him. John pointed out to me that I spend enough time with my hall mates because I live with them. My roommate has mentioned that John has a lot of jealousy, but John only acts this way because of how much he loves me. It's sweet that John wants to spend all his time with me. He pays so much attention that even if we aren't supposed to be hanging out he'll show up to the events I go to with my friends. A few of my friends get angry, but they are too protective of me and overreact to situations. One time my hall mates caught us arguing outside my dorm with him cursing at me telling me to fuck off. I was crying and was slightly embarrassed for them to see me upset, but they just didn't understand that it was my fault the fight even happened in the first place.

Lately, I don't know how to answer my mom's emails to explain why I haven't been calling home. She wants to know more about me and John and when my little sister Lisa is going to visit me. She expressed concerns to me over winter break saying he had too much control over me, but she doesn't know how college relationships work. I don't want to talk to her about it. I used to want my little sister to visit, but John helped me see that keeping track of a little sister for a weekend would be dumb and wouldn't let us hang out together as much.

The first time he called me a bitch I was really surprised, but I mean we all have bad days. One time we even talked about taking a break in our relationship, but he actually broke down saying over and over how he wouldn't know what to do with himself because of how much we love each other. He went over everything that he has sacrificed for me and what he has done for me. The list was so long that it outweighs when he occasionally loses his temper causing him to

insult and curse at me. Plus it's my fault and he is right to call me self-centered because I don't always think about him and I flirt with guys without realizing it. John is such a great boyfriend that I have a hard time finding any of his faults. We need each other. If I really love him, then I will only ask about really big problems. No one wants to fight and I am just not strong enough to avoid crying during an argument.

I know relationships are hard. Not everyone can understand how happy John and I can be. I don't know what my life would be like without him.

Appendix D: Contact Information
Website

http://www.helpguide.org/mental/domestic_violence_abuse_types_signs_causes_effects.htm

On-Campus Resources

University of Richmond Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)

Location: Richmond Hall 201

Phone: (804) 289-8119

Email: CAPS@richmond.edu

University of Richmond Office of Chaplaincy

Location: The Wilton Center Room 200

Phone: (804) 289-8500

Email: chaplaincy@richmond.edu

The Westhampton College Dean's Office

Location: The Deanery

Phone: (804) 289-8468.

University Police

Emergency On-Campus: 911

Non-Emergency: (804)289-8715

University of Richmond Student Health Center

Location: Special Programs Building First Floor

Phone: (804) 289-8064

Off-Campus Resource

YWCA

Address: 6 North 5th Street Richmond, VA 23219

Phone: 804-643-6761

Domestic and Sexual Violence Hotline: 804-643-0888

Email: info@ywcarichmond.org

Appendix E: IRB Approval
UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR THE
PROTECTION OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS
NOTICE OF ACTION

Date: November 13, 2008

Name(s): Christina Moore

Faculty ☐ Student ☒ Other ☐

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Archana Bhatt

Is this for a class? ☒ yes ☐ no

If yes, department and course number Honors Thesis

Project Title: Communicative Violence in Romantic Relationships

The IRB has reviewed your research protocol by ☒ full review ☐ expedited review.

Your application is:

- | | | |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Exempt from further review | Your project does not fall within federal or university guidelines requiring review. If the nature of the project changes, you must resubmit this project for further review. |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Approved | Please review the criteria for approval at the end of this form. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Approved with conditions | Please respond via email to the Chair of the IRB how you plan to address the concerns outlined at the end of this form. Final approval is not provided until conditions are addressed and approved by the IRB. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Third party verification required. | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Disapproved | The IRB has some concerns regarding your proposed research; therefore, your project cannot be approved at this time. Please contact the Chair of the IRB to discuss the issues outlined at the end of this form. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Incomplete | A decision on your protocol has been temporarily withheld until the information listed at the end of this form is provided for IRB consideration. Please send this information to the Chair of the IRB via email. |


Richard Kirk Jones, Chair

Institutional Review Board (1565)

Nov 13, 2008

Date

Notes: Please see notes at end.

Appendix F: Focus Group and One-on-One Interviews Themes

Age
Awareness
Balance
Blame
Boy Characteristics
Communication
Cycle
Disclaimer
Desiring Characteristics
Different for Guys
Ending the Relationship
Future Expectations
Friend's Role
Generalization
Girl Characteristics
Love
Long Distance
Know Someone
Misunderstanding
Originally
Outside perspective
Point
Pattern
Progression to Violence
Rationalizing Behavior
Relationships
Role Models
Return to Normal
Side Effects
University of Richmond direct Examples
Warning Signs

Appendix G: Key Informant Themes

Age
Awareness
Blame
Boy Characteristics
Communication
Cycle
Ending the Relationship
Friend's Role
Girl Characteristics
Imagery
Outside perspective
Point
Pattern
Progression to Violence
Rationalizing Behavior
University of Richmond direct Examples
Warning Signs